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November 1923

THE FRUITLESS ORCHARD



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THE FRUITLESS ORCHARD :: :: ::

*By Peggy Webling :: Author of
"Boundary House," "The Scent Shop," "Comedy
Corner," etc. :: :: :: :: :: ::*



*LONDON: HUTCHINSON & CO.
:: :: PATERNOSTER ROW :: ::*

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THE FRUITLESS ORCHARD

CHAPTER I

Thoughts of an orchard in Spring. The pleasure of interviewing for the *Arrow*. A girl in Villiers Street. Alison Booker at home. A glimpse at Uncle Jonah.

DOWN the Strand from Fleet Street—round the corner by Charing Cross Post Office—across Trafalgar Square—along the Haymarket to Piccadilly Circus—right about face and back again.

Alison Booker walked as slowly as she could, without loitering.

A glance at the face of the clock in the dark tower of St. Martin's-among-the-houses, once in-the-fields, showed her that it was five minutes to nine. Only five minutes to nine, and her appointment was not until half-past ten o'clock.

Fortunately it was a fine night; chilly enough, but with no frost in the air; a pale, clear, April night, with a moon, nearly at the full, gleaming like an ineffectual lamp, through fine, drifting clouds.

—Along the Haymarket—across Trafalgar Square—round the corner by Charing Cross Post Office—into the Strand.

Alison Booker was as unnoticed and unimportant in the flux and flow of the crowded streets as a fallen leaf in the eddy of a stream. She walked with the quick, assured step of the girl of a city, neither jostling

others nor touched herself; calm and unhurried in the busiest traffic; observant, but with eyes that were impersonal and indifferent in their longest gaze.

She occasionally stopped to look into a shop window, but with little interest. Once she paused at the door of a restaurant, reading the printed bill of fare all through, but evidently checked in her desire to enter by the price list, for she gave a little sigh in turning away. Walking the streets for an hour and a half is a hungry business.

Alison had had nothing to eat since she left home at six o'clock, and she would not be back until past eleven. But suppers were expensive, and she always disliked spending money on herself, a fact which accounted for her too plain clothes, perilously near to shabbiness, and habit of wasting time and shoe leather by long walks to save penny fares.

Along the Strand—round the corner by Charing Cross Post Office—across Trafalgar Square—then she altered her march by meandering down the steps into the wide space below, where the two ponds gleamed dully and sombrely in the moonlight, spoilt by scraps of paper and the scum of the day's dirt.

Alison stood still for several minutes, at the stone edging of one of these basins, apparently looking down into it, but with thoughts which transformed the grimy surface into a clear, shining pool, surrounded by a circle of uneven stones, with blades of grass shooting up between them and patches of soft moss.

She had seen such a pool on the previous day, in an old world garden, far from Trafalgar Square. It was in Surrey, surrounding the studio of—Alison's memory of a name failed for a minute—the studio of George Chichester, her "Artist of the Week." She had interviewed Chichester at his own house, and he had taken her all over the grounds for two reasons. Firstly, he liked his garden much better than his rooms, and secondly, it gave them both something to talk about.

Alison and the artist had been secretly afraid of each other. She would not have gone to see him if her editor had not insisted, and he would not have received her if his wife had not insisted. They were victims of the higher powers which governed their lives.

There grew an orchard beyond the lily pond, at the end of Chichester's garden : a square, small orchard in early blossom, as if a wandering cloud, laden with snow, had been rent by the April wind and scattered the soft flakes over the bare trees, hiding their old gaunt branches in a vesture of beauty. Daffodils covered the ground, beginning to fade, but golden still.

Alison remembered and returned to the orchard in spirit as she stood in Trafalgar Square. The sight and the scent of it swept over her, with a feeling of the springy grass beneath her tread, and the fresh, clean air in her face.

She had been suddenly freed from the dreariness of a long London Winter. A pulsing, turbulent sense of youth—foreign to the nature of the diffident, shy, self-repressed girl—had bewildered her for a minute, with a quick flush to her cheeks and brightness to her eyes. She had felt, quivering and responsive, the Spring of the year in her blood, at one with its promise of manifest loveliness.

There was no thought of herself or of her own blossoming in Alison's mind. She would have been amazed to know that the stranger beside her, whom she had momentarily forgotten, found a fleeting delight, in keeping with her own impersonal emotion, in her rapt expression and heightened colour.

He had considered her a very ordinary-looking girl until that minute. To tell the truth, he returned to the same opinion before they parted. She had thought of the little orchard again and again. It was still in her mind, not yet pushed back into the caverns of memory.

A clock in the distance chimed the hour. Alison straightened her shoulders, touched the little bar of her eye-glasses with two fingers, and walked briskly out of the Square.

She was bound for the Strand Theatre—it stood in the Strand itself at the time when Alison Booker was a journalist—and made her way to the stage door. Her appointment was to interview a popular comedienne.

The door-keeper knew Miss Booker, but he did not choose to acknowledge her. He was a big, fat man, possessing a maximum of face with a minimum of expression.

“Good evening,” said the girl. “Will you please send my card to Miss Coral de Lacey.”

He read the card, “Miss Alison Booker,” with “Representing the *Arrow*” printed in the left hand corner, turned it over, and looked at her in silence. Being accustomed to stage door-keepers, she was unabashed.

“I have an appointment,” she added, and turned her attention to a frame of old fashioned photographs hanging in the little passage-way.

It was absurd, and nobody would have suspected it, but the glare of the fat man made her nervous. The card was ultimately sent in by the hand of the call-boy, who also read, turned it over, and stared. After a few minutes a dresser appeared; a severe woman, short, but as stout as the door-keeper.

“Are you the Harrer?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Alison, beginning to enjoy herself.

“Then you gotta wait!” said the dresser.

“Thank you,” said Alison, with politeness.

The door-keeper suddenly became friendly, when they were alone again.

“Been in front, Miss?” he asked. “Have you seen the piece?”

“I saw it on the first night.”

“Ah! I can hear all I want by opening this door

and standing at the top of the stairs," said the door-keeper, folding the evening paper into a small square and sitting down on a stool under the light.

He spoke once more from behind his paper, after reading for some minutes, to end the subject.

"Never heard such screechin' in all my life!"

"Do you mean the chorus?" asked Alison.

"All of 'em. But mum's the word, Miss," said the door-keeper, and, to her great surprise, he lowered the paper just enough to show his two small eyes and solemnly winked.

It was past eleven before Alison had finished her interview. Miss de Lacey kept her waiting and proved to be a disappointing subject, requiring time and patience. She was the fifth actress whom Alison had seen that week. They all came of military families and declared that they "loved their work, dogs, hunting, and a quiet, secluded life."

Alison smiled as she made her notes, privately thinking that Miss de Lacey's French ancestors probably resided in the Rue de Lambeth, or le Bois de Saint Jean. But she was so tired it was difficult to flatter Miss de Lacey, or take any interest in her pet, a spoilt six ounces of toy terrier, asleep on a pink satin cushion.

She generally flattered her interviewees, tactfully, without fulsomeness unless she saw they expected it. It was one of her methods with women, who always liked her. With men she was not quite so successful. She had no conceit, and a girl who thinks nothing of herself usually finds men agree with her. They take her at her own valuation.

Alison hurried to Charing Cross when she left the Strand Theatre.

The beautiful, haunting mental picture of the orchard had faded away. She had no time to linger in step or in thought, but before turning towards the station she stood still for a couple of seconds, looking in the direction of Fleet Street.

The office of the *Arrow* was so near! Habit—impulse—desire—made her long to go there, even at such an hour, but the doors would be closed, the windows dark, the rooms empty.

“What a fool I am!” thought Alison.

As she went down Villiers Street, almost running, a girl who was hurrying in the opposite direction attracted her attention as they approached and passed each other.

She was a dark-haired, vivid, handsome girl, quick and bold of glance, with a light and swinging gait; unconscious of, or indifferent to, the eyes that followed her with admiration or offence. She baffled Alison, who was observant and experienced in judging the women whom she saw in the West End at night.

“Not an actress, or a work-girl, or a night hawk. Very young, but knows how to take care of herself—uses too much scent, but it’s good, lily-of-the-valley, I think—no, mignonette—the complexion’s genuine. Lovely! Common? N—no. Oh, no! How much more attractive in every way than I am, but I’m afraid I like her none the better for that.”

This feminine summing up was the result of one glance face to face, followed by one over the shoulder, and Alison instantly began to think out a short story with the unknown girl as heroine. She wrote many short stories for the *Arrow*, under her own name and a pseudonym, George Weston.

* * * * *

Alison lived in a small house, in a small street, somewhere in that debatable land which lies between the growing popularity of Hammersmith and the declining pretentiousness of West Kensington.

Courtley Gardens had originally been called by the far more interesting name of Courtley Mews. It was all that remained of the Courtley Estate, once the property of a rich and distinguished family—see “An Old Love Story, being the Private Papers of Sir

Oliver Courtley and Rosamond his Wife," edited by Alison Booker, Moiry & Co. Ltd., 25/- net—which had passed into obscurity, or died out, like so many rich, distinguished families.

All the little houses looked alike in the semi-darkness, with blinds pulled down—a fast asleep little street, snug and smug—no sound to be heard but the occasional yawling of a cat, and a muffled chorus of men's voices from the Courtley Arms round the corner, where a concert was being held. The patrons of the Courtley Arms, when they hired a room for the evening, believed in using it to midnight.

Alison picked out her own house, glancing at a faint light gleaming through the slats of the Venetian blinds on the first floor, and opened the door with a latch key hanging round her neck on a ribbon. She had recently lost two keys and wore the third in this way as an act of penance, like the Ancient Mariner with the albatross.

She closed the door softly behind her, tip-toed down the passage and turned up the gas in a kitchen at the back of the house. There was a cup of cocoa ready to be heated, with a box of biscuits, and a letter on the table.

The letter contained her weekly cheque from the publishers of the Arrow, five guineas, detailed as payment for "three cols. G.R.G." (Green Room Gossip), and two guineas for "The Wealth of Life" (1500 word short story).

Alison pulled off her hat and gloves and put them on the dresser, threw open her coat, and sat down to eat her supper. She rested an elbow on the table, propping her cheek. Very tired and discouraged, the sprightly Green Room Gossiper (as her editor called Miss Booker) felt she had had enough of journalism and the drama to last a lifetime. Even the five guinea cheque failed to cheer her.

What a long day! What a weary tramp! Down the Strand, across Trafalgar Square, along the Hay-

market—silly interviewees, and a Falstaff at the stage door who dared to wink at her over the top of an evening paper!

It was all wretched and horrible. She would never become famous, or have a play produced, or get her novel published. What had she read the other day? The sense, if not the actual words, came back to her:

“Oh, you heavy laden, who at this hour sit down to the cursed travail of the pen . . . the pen is the only tool you can handle, your only means of earning bread! Oh, your prices per thousand words! Oh, your paragraphings and your interviewings! And oh, the black despair that awaits those down-trodden in the fray.”*

That was true. How true! Her youth was already fading away; she looked into the future without joy, without hope—

“And I hate caraway seeds in biscuits!” concluded Alison.

Her face changed as she suddenly laughed at herself, brightening and colouring.

She was not pretty as the unobservant define the word. Her hair was pale brown, soft and fine, but straight and without lustre; her features were ordinary enough. People often told her she looked clever, and that is an adjective any girl resents, however true it may be. They never said she was charming, although there was a certain elusive attraction in her mild and diffident manner, a little cold perhaps and self-conscious, but much too void of conceit to mark her a successful woman.

Her eyes, peeping through glasses, were heavy-lidded, blue-grey; her mouth was well shaped and closed firmly over big, white teeth; her nose was her best feature, delicate in modelling, refined, finished—but while a bad nose will spoil a handsome face, a good one is rarely admired. People take it for

* “The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft” (George Gissing).

granted. Her chin was small and round, a pretty little chin, but feeble. She was a pale girl, healthy, vigorous by force of will, for all her tastes and moods inclined to idle ease. A still, thoughtful, ultra-sensitive girl, prudent to a fault, ambitious (though none of her few intimates suspected it), loyal, loving and undemonstrative.

Her long reverie in the kitchen, when her meagre supper had been eaten, was interrupted by a step on the stairs and a voice over the banisters. At the same minute there was the sound of violent coughing from an upper room.

"Ally, is that you? Ally dear!"

Alison sprang to her feet and ran into the passage. Her mother was standing above, with a small lamp in her hand. Mrs. Booker's grey hair was fastened in such a tight knot at the top of her head that even her eyebrows seemed to be strained upwards. She was colourless and bony, wearing a purple ulster, in lieu of a dressing gown, over her nightdress.

"Darling! I hoped you were asleep!" exclaimed the girl, in a mingled tone of love and worry.

"I was roused by your uncle coughing," replied Mrs. Booker. I'm coming to get him some hot lemonade and one of the home made buns."

"A bun—now?"

"Yes."

Alison made a little, annoyed sound.

"You go back to bed, Mother. I'll get it."

"But you must be so tired, my dear. I've had a good sleep."

"I'm not a bit tired. Do go back to bed!"

"Look sharp, Ally."

Alison made a glass of lemonade, selected the biggest of the home made buns and carried up a tray to her uncle's back room on the second floor.

There was a gleam from a flickering night-light, placed behind a pitcher in one corner, but as the window was curtainless, she could distinguish all the

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objects in the room by the wishy-washy light of the April moon.

Her uncle was sitting up in bed, an amazing object to anyone who did not understand his peculiarities, for his knees were drawn up to his chin under the coverlet, and he wore on his head an old fashioned, curly-brimmed silk top hat. He had left off coughing and was softly whistling to himself.

"Here is your lemonade, uncle Jonah," said Alison, too accustomed to the apparition of the high hat even to smile.

Uncle Jonah took a long sip.

"Too hot! Too hot! Too much sugar!" said the old man, in a piping, fretful voice.

She ran downstairs, added some cold water and returned. Uncle Jonah sipped again.

"Too cold! Stone cold. Why have you taken out all the sugar?" he asked.

Alison, without a word of protest, made the lemonade hot again on a ring at the top of the gas fire, and put in another lump of sugar from a little private store in the cupboard. Not a word passed. Long experience had taught her to minister to uncle Jonah in silence. He preferred whistling and grumbling to her conversation.

She sat down in a chair at the end of his bed and waited patiently until he had finished the lemonade and bun, then she put the tray outside the door, wishing the old gentleman were as sleepy as she felt herself.

There was silence for ten minutes before she received the order of dismissal. Then uncle Jonah took off the top hat, placed it carefully on the floor beside him, and slipped so suddenly beneath the blankets that it looked as if an unseen hand had tweaked him down by the toes. He piped his niece a muffled good night.

Alison slept in Mrs. Booker's room adjoining. She undressed in the semi-darkness, hardly making

a sound, and crept to the side of her mother's bed. She stooped down, listening to the soft, regular breath of sleep, and studied the worn, long profile against the pillow.

Alison had lived alone with her mother all her life—except for the advent of uncle Jonah—and loved in her the father she had forgotten, the brothers and sisters she had longed for and never had, the childish friends she had never made.

“My dearest!” she murmured, and bent to kiss her mother's cheek, but stopped and drew away, afraid of waking her.

“My dearest!” she said again, softly.

Then the repeated word smote her conscience. Dearest?

The quick blood leapt in her veins at a sudden thought. Was it possible—was it possible, she asked herself—for anyone in the world to be dearer than her mother? And the answer was swift and inevitable. Yes!

Alison fell asleep very quickly. She dreamed, not of the man whom she secretly loved, but of George Chichester's orchard. She seemed to see it in every season of the year, in bud, in bloom, and bearing fruit.

CHAPTER II

Alison calls at the Arrow office. Barrington Chase criticises a short story. Mrs. Booker. Alison's curiosity over the new lodgers. Her first talk with Jerry and how it affected them both.

THE *Weekly Arrow* was shot from an office in Fleet Street, whither Alison Booker's thoughts had wandered on the night of her interview with Miss Coral de Lacey.

If a group of narrow cells, dark, rather airless and situated at the top of a dangerous spiral staircase could be considered spacious and convenient, those two adjectives might be truthfully applied to the office of the *Arrow*.

The publication was successful, being one of the many ventures of a well known journalist, who had the gift of judging his public, starting papers and selling them before their little course was fully run.

Mr. Strathern—the well known journalist was a Scotsman—was fortunate in his assistant editor. Mr. Strathern provided the ideas and Mr. Barrington Chase carried them out. Mr. Strathern was unrepresentable, being morose, irritable and ill-mannered. Mr. Chase was urbane and good-looking. The chief had brains, the assistant had a fluent tongue. They were on excellent terms, for all Strathern demanded was intelligent obedience, and Barrington Chase had the soul of a spaniel.

It is doubtful if the *Arrow* would have found its

"own little niche," to quote Mr. Chase, in the Fleet Street of to-day. London was different at the beginning of the century, and the *Arrow* was unique, personal without being impertinent, well written, and occasionally witty.

Alison Booker slowly mounted the spiral staircase, one April day, carrying her weekly contribution.

It was exactly a quarter past four o'clock. She had lingered on the way on purpose to arrive at a quarter past four. The assistant editor was officially accessible at the hour, but she had waited fifteen minutes to save the appearance of anxiety to see him.

She paused a second before pushing through the swing door into the outer office, straightened her hat, pulled out the bows of a silk scarf round her neck—girls wore silk scarves at that period—and made an effectual effort to look indifferent and composed.

The office boy, under-sized and sharp, greeted her as an old friend.

"Is Mr. Chase in, John?" she asked. "Is he disengaged?"

John, who followed the editorial directions to paragraph writers, "never waste your words," nodded towards a closed door on which was printed "Mr. Barrington Chase" very small and "Private" very large.

Alison tapped. The voice she knew so well bade her "Come in." She opened the door, passed through, closed it behind her, and stood in the Presence.

Mr. Barrington Chase was sitting at his desk in a swivel chair, reading a magazine. He did not rise, but slowly revolved towards her, smiling a welcome.

"Ah! Miss Booker!"—in a tone which implied she was one of the last people in London he expected to see—"delighted to see you. Quite well? Good!"

It is difficult in the curves and angles of printed words to express the fulness of his voice, the air of benign patronage exuding from his person, the

warmth of his broad hand, or the effect of his favourite sound as he lingered over it, as if the vowel sound repeated itself many times.

"Quite well? Good!" said Mr. Chase, pressing his visitor's gloved palm against his own, but not raising his elbow from the arm of the chair, so that she was obliged to bend a little over him.

Barrington was a big man, with noticeably thick, heavy shoulders. He had a fine head, a full beard and a moustache that hid the tell-tale shape of his chin and mouth. When he laughed enough to show his teeth they did not promise well, as if Nature had tossed an odd handful between his jaws, discoloured ivory, higgledy-piggledy, but he rarely laughed.

Mr. Chase's best advice to his staff would have been "Do not write as I speak," for he used long words and arranged his sentences so carefully that his chief said one could positively see the semicolons, hyphens and interpolated passages as he talked.

"Be seated, Miss Booker," said Mr. Chase; "I am rather rushed for time this afternoon—oh, no, please be seated—but I can spare a few minutes. Next week's G.R.G.? Thank you."

Alison sat down obediently.

He moved his swivel chair square with the desk again. A chair of this description is ordinary enough, but it was interesting to note the use that the big man made of it. Its movements, under his weight, became characteristic, impressive, dignified. He generally turned in half circles, slowly and equably, as on the present occasion, between the door and the desk in one direction, or the desk and the window in the other. When he wished to be rid of unwelcome callers he increased the speed of the twist. It was equivalent to showing them the door. When he was very indignant he revolved so slowly that the action became mysterious and awful, as if it were done by an unknown power. When he was jocular, he jerked, impishly.

Alison had learned to judge the reception to expect by his position as she entered, for he knew her knock. To-day it had been highly favourable, witness the full face welcome, followed by the prolonged handshake.

"Good! Very apt and readable," murmured Barrington, glancing through the three typewritten pages of Green Room Gossip she had given to him; "Quite satisfactory, Miss Booker. Thank you. Now, about that last little tale of yours?"

He selected the little tale from a pile of manuscripts on his desk and read the opening and final passages, frowning. Alison watched him anxiously. She thought he was the finest critic in London. He often implied as much in their conversations.

"A *leetle* exaggerated?" questioned Barrington Chase, turning his full brown eyes from the paper to her face.

"Oh, do you think so? I wanted to drive home the point of the story," she replied humbly.

"True! But the frequent repetitions weaken the effect, and the crisis is so unexpected."

"I meant it to be unexpected, Mr. Chase."

"True!" he repeated; "I only wished to draw your attention to the —er—shall we say fantastic element you have introduced in the last three pages. Glance over it again yourself—allow me—from here——"

He flattened the manuscript on his desk and Alison stooped forward to read where his finger pointed.

Again she was very near to him, and conscious that he instantly turned his attention from her story to its writer. Their shoulders touched and he pressed a little against her. She did not raise her eyes, for she knew well the expression they would meet in his; an intimate, questioning, liquid glance that troubled and puzzled her.

"I don't see why you should object to the fantastic touch, Mr. Chase," she said, mechanically reading

line after line, apparently absorbed and unaware of the pressure against her shoulder.

"Well—er—to be frank, it gave me the impression of an attempt to be humourous. If I didn't know your style so well I should have thought you were writing with your tongue in your cheek. Will you forgive me for saying that it is unintentionally comic—not problematical at all—for it positively made me laugh! I'm sorry, but candour compels——"

Mr. Chase spread out his hands and shrugged his shoulders. Alison raised an astonished face. She stared at him, expecting his expression to contradict his words.

"But it's meant to be comic—it isn't unintentional, Mr. Chase!" she cried; "It is supposed to make you laugh. Surely no reader will take it seriously."

Barrington Chase looked exceedingly foolish.

A more obtuse man would have pretended he was teasing her, but he knew Alison was too quick-witted to be deceived so easily. Her laughing lips and eyes captivated and annoyed him at the same time. She was accustomed to hang upon his words, having acknowledged his right to a literary pedestal from the first day they met. It shook a little under his feet, but he promptly steadied it and put her in the wrong.

"Meant to be comic, is it? Good! Then I must have lost my sense of humour, or your little tale is a failure. What is your opinion, Miss Booker? I reserve mine."

Alison was too sensitive to tones in a voice not to understand that he was hurt, perhaps offended. His chair had swung away from her and he began to fidget among the papers on his desk.

"I suppose it is a failure," she said, slowly.

It was very disheartening. She had so looked forward to hearing him tell her how he had chortled—one of his favourite words—over her carefully written story.

"Now, let me see, where the dickens is Nicholson's copy?" murmured Barrington, ignoring her.

There was an awkward pause.

"Of course it is a failure. I ought not to try to be subtle and satirical. I'm far too commonplace a person," said Alison.

"Don't be too severe upon yourself," said Mr. Chase, appeased by her utter depression; "Lock it away in your little *escritoire* for a while and then read it again. You will see its obvious faults at a glance."

"I will, Mr. Chase, if you don't think it would be any use trying it elsewhere," said Alison.

"No—no," he replied; "No, I fear not, unless you enclosed a note to the editor explaining the joke."

Mr. Chase meant to be crushing, but Alison only smiled. She rose and put out her hand to say good-bye.

Barrington Chase was flattered by her disappointment and meek agreement with his criticism, especially as he had great faith in her ability and knew her to be a girl of sense and humour. He had encouraged and helped her from the first, secretly surprised by the innate simplicity of her outlook where men were concerned. It was doubly strange in that she wrote about them so well. She had none of the faults he would have expected from a girl who evidently knew so little of men from personal experience. He was right in believing that her observation was keen and intimate, but disinterested. She seemed to know instinctively that men and women, at the root, were very much alike, differ as they might in leaf and flower.

Alison had no brothers, boy cousins, or men friends. The only man whom she thoroughly understood, was her elderly eccentric uncle Jonah, and uncles do not count.

She amused Barrington Chase, but he was shrewd enough to see that her trembling response to his tentative love-making—half frightened pleasure at his

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feeble flutings of the wild music of the emotions—would undoubtedly change in the course of time. But it was pleasant enough for the day, harmless, and did not compromise his dignity. That it might have any effect upon Alison, beyond giving her a little happiness that he told himself she well deserved, did not occur to his mind.

He liked to see her blush and shrink away from him; he liked to hold her hand; he liked to whisper in her ear sometimes, an arm round her little shoulders. Trifles! He was a very considerate man—or a very careful one.

“Must you really go?” said Mr. Chase, turning his indicative chair once more in his visitor’s direction.

“You said you were very busy when I came in.”

“Did I? It’s the truth, dear lady, but if you have anything else to discuss with me, I am quite at your service. How goes the novel?”

She was delighted at the question, but shook her head dubiously.

“I finished the tenth chapter last night.”

“Good! It’s dogged as does it, you know. When am I to be allowed a peep at it?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Mr. Chase. It makes me nervous to think of such a thing.”

“Nervous—of me, Alison?”

He lowered his voice to speak her name.

She answered with rare boldness.

“Of you more than anybody else in London.”

“Silly little girl! Have I been such a severe critic to her then?”

He left his chair and followed the girl towards the door, holding her wrist, as if she were pulling him along.

“You frighten me a little sometimes,” she admitted, still moving away.

“Nonsense! Nonsense!” murmured Barrington, as he slipped his two first fingers under her unbuttoned glove against her palm.

Alison, who had only pretended to seek escape until then, really tried to release her wrist. Barrington smiled and held it firmer. Her momentary agitation pleased him, but he was not sorry for the little scene to be interrupted by John's knock at the door.

There was always a hint of uncertainty in his mind when he reached the point of gentle force. It had often happened before, and he had had the prudence to go no farther. One could never be sure of the most sensible of women—he had a high opinion of Alison's sense—not mistaking a man's good natured little caresses for a sign of serious affection. *

He had no affection for Miss Booker, but her hands were pleasant to hold, she had a clear complexion and soft little throat—yes, it was just as well that John had tapped at the door.

"Come in!" cried Mr. Chase, returning to his throne with heavy alacrity, and beginning to read the first manuscript he could lay his hands on.

John opened the door to admit a stranger, and a bland editorial voice dismissed Alison at the same minute.

"Good afternoon, Miss Booker. I regret I cannot use your little story. Good afternoon! John, close the door after the lady. Now, Mr.—?"

* * * * *

Alison walked slowly through Hyde Park on her way home.

Her sense of humour was troubled by Barrington Chase missing the whole point of her satirical story, chiefly in that it reminded her of many occasions, when she had tried to talk freely to him, on which he had failed to follow her thoughts. She would have stamped any other man "dull," but his personality confused her judgment.

He overwhelmed her with phrases; he praised her obvious good qualities so often that she doubted the possession of any others; above everything else, his

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gift for expressing admiration without committing himself to words, and the look in his brown eyes when they had been long alone, enraptured and bewildered her undeveloped nature.

In brief, Alison had fallen in love with the shadow of love.

Some of the early affairs of Barrington Chase with women were not of the kind to be told, even by a gentleman so devotedly attached to the discussion of the first person singular. Of others, no man boasts of being jilted, and the diamond ring Alison admired on his little finger had been twice returned to him by young ladies to whom he had graciously thrown the handkerchief. He was not inclined to offer it a third time.

Alison knew nothing of his private affairs, except that he lived with his mother and elder sisters. He was equally ignorant of her home life, but chose to believe that she worked, as he did, to add to an already sufficient income. He always persuaded himself that his friends were comfortable and happy.

"My story is *not* a failure!" exclaimed Alison.

She had sat down for a few minutes, on one of the free seats in the park, to look through her rejected manuscript. The writing of it had filled a week of her life with intense interest. Every sentence, every word, every punctuation mark had been studied. That was Alison Booker's way. She had no gift for facile success. Her work, from the first paragraph accepted by the *Arrow*, was the work of an artist.

Her chief, and as time was to prove the abiding, fault was over-reticence and inability to write with self-abandonment. As Chichester once said of her, when her fifth novel was at the beginning of its long life, she knew how to call a spade a spade, but did it in a whisper.

"My story is not a failure," reiterated Alison, rising and walking quickly away in the chill April wind.

All the trees in the park were budding. She thought of the orchard at Esher, and wished Mr. Chase had praised the interview with the artist. The opening paragraphs, describing the promise in the bare boughs and the fulfilment of the daffodils, had cost her not a little trouble. He could praise so delightfully on occasion. Every week she thrilled to the hope of it, too often shattered by the judicial "Very readable, very satisfactory."

On this particular day she could quite well have sent her copy by post, but had been unable to resist the temptation of taking it herself.

* * * * *

When Alison reached Courtley Gardens she had a little pang of self-reproach. She ought to have stopped at home, on such a fine day, to allow her mother to go out. They could not both have left home, on account of uncle Jonah and the new lodgers on the ground floor, who were not acquainted with the old gentleman's eccentricities. New lodgers, like new clothes, have to be protected and considered until they pass into the wear and tear of daily use.

When Alison entered the house she heard her mother's sewing machine in the parlour—the Bookers kept to the old fashioned word "parlour," but their neighbours said "drorin' room"—and found uncle Jonah walking up and down the passage, with his silk hat on his head and an open umbrella in his hand. The ceiling was sound, even if it had been raining, but he said an umbrella helped him to imagine he was in the meadows.

"Just taking a little constitutional, Ally," said the old man; "Your Ma's at the spinet as usual."

"I can hear it, uncle Jonah."

She went into the cheerful little room, bright with its fire, old furniture, and three pen'orth of Spring, yellow-red wallflowers, in a honeypot on the mantel-piece.

Mrs. Booker did plain sewing for a shop in the neighbourhood. She sat at her machine in the window working against time, the floor about her littered with strips of coloured print.

She looked almost as spare and unsightly in her afternoon gown as she did in the old purple coat over her nightdress. Her hair was screwed into the same little tight knot, the narrow band at the neck of her red blouse, with no touch of white to soften its crude colour against her skin, was fastened with a silver brooch like the bowl of a salt spoon, and she wore an ugly black shawl round her shoulders.

Mrs. Booker had been a very pretty woman in her youth, but all that remained of the old glory was the brightness of her dark, hollow eyes, the grace of her work-worn hands, the fine carriage of her head, in spite of her round shoulders and narrow chest.

Alison knew little of her mother's early married life, except that it had been a continual fight with the most cruel and petty of all foes—poverty. Her husband had died while their only child was still among the Infants at a London County Council school.

He had been trying to get beforehand with the world, from the day of his marriage to the day of his death, without success. A writer of sorts, Alison's father had been ambitious without persistence, enthusiastic without earnestness, talented without character. He had talked and his wife had drudged, leaving her at last with a host of half tragic, half sordid memories, a quantity of notes for articles and stories that were never written, a few pounds in the Post Office Savings Bank, and the peculiar legacy of his uncle Jonah.

It was typical of Henry Booker to have offered indefinite hospitality to his old uncle, partly out of kindness, partly out of a mistaken belief in his secret wealth. The adoption of uncle Jonah proved to be the last of his hopeless attempts to obtain a fortune.

Unfortunately the only thing of value possessed by

uncle Jonah would die with him, being a small annuity, purchased by the scrapings and hoardings of sixty years' work as the ninth part of a man. Uncle Jonah's only other relative was an unmarried daughter, who escaped to America directly he was off her hands, thereafter limiting her acts of filial piety to sending an illustrated newspaper every Christmas, with best love, but no address.

When Mrs. Booker and her daughter moved from one lodging to another, the old gentleman accompanied them. He was under the cheerful delusion that the small sum of money due every three months from an insurance company not only kept himself—in his own words, “like a fightin’ cock”—but was the chief support of the two others. They did not undeceive him, even when he suggested spending the surplus on a country cottage, or a pony trap, or a gramophone, or crumpets every day. Uncle Jonah's idea of values had grown hazy in the passing of time.

He was lively and good tempered, except in the middle of the night, and popularly believed, in Courtley Gardens, to be the oldest inhabitant of the district. Indeed, Mrs. Cutting of the little grocery at the corner always mentioned him, to Alison's joy, as “your poor dear uncle the centurion.” She pictured the old gentleman, with his top hat and umbrella, leading a Roman hundred.

“Oh, Mother dear, how tired I am!” exclaimed Alison, when she came home from her walk through the park.

Mrs. Booker stopped the eternal treadle-treadle-tread of her machine and looked at the girl affectionately.

“I'll get the tea in a few minutes, dearie, but I promised to get this job done to-night.”

“I should think you'd made enough of those print aprons—pinafores, whatever they're called—to supply all the domestic dames in Hammersmith,” said Alison, taking up one of the finished prints and look-

ing at it with disdain; "What is their absurd name—'Comfy coveralls.'"

She threw aside the comfy coverall and sat down in the one armchair, watching Mrs. Booker stooping over the machine. She was angry with herself for not returning sooner to help; angry with her mother for her uncomplaining patience; angry with uncle Jonah for walking up and down the passage under his ridiculous umbrella.

Barrington Chase had been very unkind to her about the story. She brooded over his words, his expression, his incomprehensible misunderstanding of the vein in which it was written. Then she thought of his shoulder pressed against her own and the way he had slipped his fingers inside her glove.

. . . Unkind? No, he was so gentle and considerate! She closed her eyes, lying back in the chair, and spread her right hand wide, trying to recall the sensation of his touch, so clinging and warm. His fingers always seemed to pulse upon her palm.

Their friendship and intimacy, during the year she had known him, had ebbed and flowed according to his humour. Sometimes he was all graciousness, sometimes he treated her like an uninteresting stranger. He was sure of her loyalty, and she was not the first young woman to mistake an egoist for a great man.

Alison was awakened from her daydream by the stopping of the sewing machine. Her mother stooped and kissed her in passing. The girl sprang to her feet.

"Oh, what a selfish thing I am!" she cried; "I ought to have got tea."

"You change your shoes, Ally, and take off that frock before coming downstairs," said Mrs. Booker.

"Shall I always have to change my frock when I come in?" exclaimed Alison, pettishly; "Oh, Mother! I shall never earn any more than I do now with my wretched little 'pars' and snippets."

"Yes, you will, when you get your novel published," said Mrs. Booker.

"And you're so plainly dressed," continued the girl in the same tone; "I hate the sight of that red blouse and old brooch."

"My dear, I wouldn't wear silks and satins if I had them," said Mrs. Booker, smiling; "They wouldn't be suitable for my work. I'm very contented to be as I am."

"Contented, Mother!" cried Alison, with a contemptuous glance round the room.

"Yes. I am at peace, with a good fire in the grate, enough food upon the table, and I don't owe anybody a farthing."

"A fire and food and no debts," repeated Alison, bitterly; "And that is all one needs to make one happy, is it?"

"I was speaking for myself, Ally, not for you. You're young and everything lies before you—but I must go and get your uncle's tea, dearie, it's past his usual time."

"Get my uncle's tea," repeated Alison, as she went into her bedroom to change her frock; "Oh, how weary I am of my uncle, and this house, and this perpetual work, work, work."

As she threw her hat and coat upon the bed—Alison, like all literary women, was very untidy—her discontented face changed and brightened. She saw there were two white blouses and a little pile of handkerchiefs, beautifully ironed and folded, lying on the top of her chest of drawers.

"Oh, Mother, you've done my ironing!" she cried, running downstairs a few minutes later; "But I wish you wouldn't take the trouble. I meant to do it myself this evening, or to-morrow, or sometime."

"My dear, I was tired of seeing the things rolled up on the kitchen dresser," said Mrs. Booker; "Call down your uncle to make the toast. I've cooked you a fricassee."

Alison summoned her uncle and sat down to enjoy the fried potatoes her mother called a fricassee.

It was uncle Jonah's privilege and pleasure to make the toast, much as Alison chafed to see him do it. He sat at the very edge of his chair and stooped so far forward it looked as if his face, instead of the bread, had to be well browned. If one slice were burned, the balance was restored by the next being left white. Now and again the performance was enlivened by his top hat, which he rarely removed in the daytime, tipping over his eyes, when he would drop the fork and clutch at its brim, piping for help.

Mrs. Booker never lost patience, but rescued the toast or the toaster with prompt good temper.

"Have you seen anything of the new lodgers, Mother?" asked Alison, scraping the burnt bread with an angry glance at the unconscious old man.

"Yes, and I'm puzzled over them, Ally. The boy and his father went out this afternoon, with a campstool and several boards under their arms."

"Boards, Mother dear? Do you think they're sandwich men? And a campstool? Perhaps they were going to wait at the pit door of a theatre."

"Small drawing boards they looked like to me," said Mrs. Booker; "But that's not the strangest thing. You should have seen the way the boy was dressed, Ally! He was scrambling into his overcoat in the passage just as I came downstairs. He had on brown knickerbockers, my dear, with a velvet coat and a broad white collar. His hair had been curled. You'd be surprised to see how childish he looked."

"He must be fifteen, or sixteen, years old, Mother. Was his father wearing a velvet coat too? Perhaps they're the celebrated Brothers Cuff, or something of that sort, at the music halls."

"Mr. Cuff was wearing a long, shabby overcoat—not the one he came here in—with an old brown hat," said Mrs. Booker.

"Did Mrs. Cuff go with them?"

"No. She called out from their sitting room, 'Don't you sit in one place too long, Jerry. Take care of your cold, my lad.'"

"I wish the boy would get rid of his cold, instead of taking care of it. I could hear him coughing in bed last night. Uncle Jonah's bad enough, but I'm not going to get the ground floor hot drinks in the small hours!" said Alison, grimly.

Only one of the new lodgers interested her, the boy Jerry.

The Cuff family had moved into the house on the previous day. Mrs. Booker knew nothing of them, except the one important fact that they had good references from their last lodgings.

Mr. and Mrs. Cuff reminded Alison of reflections in distorting mirrors she had seen outside an eating house, labelled "Before and After Dining with Us." Mrs. Cuff was "Before," being long-visaged and depressed, and her husband was "After," being puffy and fat-faced.

The boy Jerry was passing through the indeterminate age, growing too fast, narrow-chested and with a bad complexion. He had fair, limp hair and big blue eyes. He had helped in the moving in with a desperate energy, and morose expression, which made Alison smile and pity him.

Mrs. Cuff told Mrs. Booker, before they had been a couple of hours in the house, that Mr. Cuff had recently retired from business. She liked the rooms, but was pessimistic about the future, because it happened to be Saturday.

"Saturday flittin'

Short sittin'!" said Mrs. Cuff.

Alison waited for the return home of Jerry and his father, after Mrs. Booker's description of the boy's velvet suit, the campstool and the drawing boards, with great curiosity.

The key turned in the front door lock at about half-past nine. She caught up a letter to post and went slowly downstairs. Mr. Cuff came in first, followed by Jerry, campstool and boards complete. The former turned into the sitting room at once. The latter closed the door and put down his burden noisily against the wall.

He took off his cap at the sight of Alison. It was true, his hair had been curled, making him look, with the broad white collar, a much younger boy. She caught a glimpse of the velvet jacket beneath his half unbuttoned overcoat.

"Good evening, Mr. Cuff," said Alison; "I am just going over to the pillar-box."

"Evening!" muttered Jerry.

She paused a second, expecting him to open the door. He looked at her and read her thoughts.

"Sorry!" was the next word he muttered, and expressed his feelings, as with the campstool and boards, by doing it as noisily as possible.

"Thanks. Will you wait till I come back? I shall be only a minute or two," said Alison.

"If you like," returned the boy.

When she returned he was leaning against the door-post, lighting a part of a cigarette he had taken out of his pocket.

Alison passed in, glanced at him curiously, and stopped.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked, bluntly.

Alison wished Jerry were a girl. Knowing nothing of boys, she was not at her ease with him. She would have liked to talk to him like a child, from the far distance of her twenty-four years, if he had not been a head taller than herself, and smoking.

There was a long, questioning silence; his eyes fixed on the cigarette between his thin, tobacco-stained fingers, Alison studying his face.

"It's a beastly shame!" suddenly exclaimed

Jerry, but in a low voice, glancing towards the closed door of his parents' sitting room; "I'm hanged if I'll stick it much longer."

Alison was amazed and more curious than ever.

"What is it you call a beastly shame?" she asked; "Won't you tell me? I'm very sorry for you——"

She saw, by his expression, this was indiscreet. Like most boys, he resented a tone of pity. She thought it wise to repeat her original question.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Of course there's money in what old Dad makes me do," growled Jerry; "But money isn't everything. I'd cut if it wasn't for old Mum. It would serve the old boy jolly well right, but the old girl's different."

So he went on grumbling to himself and picking little bits of dust out of his pocket, the cigarette in the corner of his weak, sensitive mouth.

"You're quite right to say that money isn't everything," Alison interrupted, answering the only part of his speech she understood.

"Isn't it! I'd like to know what else is any good!" he exclaimed, turning upon her; "If I'd got a pot o' money d'you think I'd make a fool of myself with this here trash——" he gave the campstool and boards a sly kick, again glancing nervously at the closed door—"I'd sooner drown myself. I *shall* drown myself one day, when old Mum's dead. I shouldn't care a tuppenny if I was 'done in' to-night."

"Don't talk such rubbish," said Alison; "You know you don't mean it."

"Don't I? Lot you know!"

He looked at her contemptuously for a second, then his expression changed. He liked her face. It was kind and young and all right.

"I say! Shall I show you something? You won't sneak off and tell the old fool, will you?"

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"Do you mean your father?"

"Of course—my old Dad—him!" said Jerry, with a jerk of his thumb towards the door.

"No, I won't tell."

"Then look 'ere!"

Jerry unstrapped the boards and held one of them up for her to see in the gaslight. There was a piece of canvas stretched across with a portrait of King Edward VII roughly painted upon it. Faultily drawn, crudely coloured, it was not without a touch of talent, and even character, in its firm lines and decided likeness.

"I done that!" said the boy.

"Did you really? From a photograph, of course?"

"Ne-ow! I've seen the old buck heaps of times. I don't want any photo. Look 'ere!"

He hastily turned up another of the boards. There was a daub of a big woman beating a little man with a frying pan, the title being written underneath:—"Her lord and master." It was ugly and coarse.

"I done that too," said Jerry, proudly.

"I don't like it at all," said Alison.

"It's a winner," said Jerry; "Why don't you like it? Look 'ere then——"

He lifted a third board to show her. It was a grotesque caricature of his father, simply labelled "From life." Alison laughed.

"Haven't I done his little piggy eyes fine? And his old snout? Everybody recognizes that one—I say! Look out! I can hear 'em talking about me. Supper's ready. Gimme the strap—right oh!——"

He packed up the other boards and the campstool quickly, pinched the fag of his cigarette and slipped it inside his pocket, with a friendly nod of good night to Alison.

She went upstairs, thinking deeply of the common, blue-eyed, contradictory boy. He had been so miserable at the beginning of their talk, so self-satisfied and happy at the end.

Alison began to idealize him, after her habit with all who interested her.

His portrait of King Edward was clever, for all its faults, the caricature of Mr. Cuff remarkably good, and she chose to forget the ugly sketch that Jerry had called a winner. The boy was worth knowing. She made up her mind to discover where he went in secret with his father, and how they earned the money of which he had boasted.

"Perhaps he longs for the training of an artist," thought Alison; "I'm sure his people misunderstand him. I'll make friends with the poor fellow. He's so young and inexperienced and troubled."

So she puzzled and pondered over Jerry. Jerry, at the same time, was thoroughly enjoying a hot supper with Mr. and Mrs. Cuff and had forgotten all about her.

CHAPTER III

Jerry listens to Alison and describes his pictures. A cruel speech and the talk which followed it. Mr. Barrington Chase holds forth on friendship.

THE acquaintanceship of Alison Booker and the boy Jerry fitfully grew into friendship, and steadily into affection.

The advances had to come from her, for he was of an age to be shy and indifferent to all women, young or old. He considered her rather old. She found him a good-natured boy, never sulky in spite of his frequent grumbling, simple and honest.

Mr. and Mrs. Cuff were pleased with the lodgings, in spite of the ill luck of having moved in on a Saturday.

Mrs. Cuff was in possession of that inestimable treasure in the eyes of her friends and relatives, a little bit of money of her own. Mr. Cuff was a devoted husband—the little bit would die with her—and was always warning her not to “over do it” and to take care of herself. She rarely walked up or downstairs without the nervous cry from Mr. Cuff:—
“Go slow, m'dear. Remember your 'eart.”

Alison could see no resemblance in Jerry to either his father or mother, except in his liking for money. He was anxious to draw well, but impatient of criticism. Approval made him exert his energies, for he loved praise. Alison's knowledge of pictures,

extensive compared with his own, opened a new world to his imagination. When she talked earnestly he listened, open-mouthed, with his brow furrowed over searching, appealing, child-like eyes. His whole mind seemed to be groping after her in mazes of new thought.

She was touched and surprised by his attitude. A few women, but no men, had discovered an abiding charm in the lonely girl. She had many friends, in consequence, but not a single lover. Barrington Chase only admired, if the truth were known, her youth and its attributes—the clear eyes, the soft complexion, the diffidence and ignorance, and more than everything else, the reflection of himself in the magic mirror of her mind, showing him a Barrington Chase almost flattered out of recognition.

It was not long before Alison knew all about Jerry Cuff, with the exception of the one fact which had baffled her curiosity when they first met. He had never told her where he went, with his father and his pictures, nearly every night. Sometimes he flatly refused to answer questions, he was shrewd enough to ignore hints, and on rare occasions he burst out laughing in her face, with boyish pleasure in her annoyance.

"I suppose you mean to become a real artist, Jerry?" said Alison, as they sat together, on a June evening, in the Bookers' parlour.

"You're always asking me that sort o' thing," he replied. "I'm a real artist now, aren't I?"

"Well, you make drawings," she said, hesitatingly; "But you know nothing about Art, do you, Jerry?"

"Don't I? P'raps not."

Alison laughed. Jerry pondered a minute.

"I s'pose you want me to go to an old drawing class, or go and hang up my pictures at the Royal Academy, like them you went to see the other day you was telling me about."

"I'm afraid they wouldn't let you hang up your pictures at the Royal Academy, Jerry. The idea of the drawing class is not so absurd."

"What could they teach me?" asked the boy, wonderingly.

"My dear Jerry, do you imagine you know everything—or anything come to that—about an artist's training?"

Jerry laughed because she did.

"Look 'ere, Miss Alison. This is what I know

He dipped into his pocket and brought out a handful of silver and coppers.

"There! I got that off old Dad this morning, earned it myself."

"Really? Have you sold one of your drawings to a paper?"

"Ne-ow! Paper be hanged."

"Then how did you earn it?—And I wish you wouldn't say 'ne-ow' when you mean 'no.'"

His tone had vexed her or she would not have corrected him so bluntly.

"Never you mind!" said Jerry, jingling the coins in his pocket. "I earned it over that last picture of mine, the one you said was an 'error.'"

"I didn't say that," observed Alison.

"Well—horror," rejoined Jerry, good-humouredly.

"I was right. You're always drawing such ugly men and women. Why is it? Do you never see any good-looking people? There must be something very wrong with your eyes."

"There isn't!" cried Jerry. "I got splendid sight, the old boy at the shop where Mum gets her spectacles told me so."

"Don't take me so literally, Jerry. I was speaking of the sight that is behind your eyes."

"Dunno know what you mean," said Jerry, rising and lounging to the window.

He was not in a receptive mood. Alison puzzled

over the money he had earned with a particularly stupid drawing.

After a while he came and sat on the arm of her chair. At times, when they were alone, he was childishly affectionate, treating Alison as he never would have treated a girl of his own age, or even a pretty woman of the mature age of twenty four. But Alison was not at all pretty in his eyes.

"I know that you think I'm not ambitious enough, Miss Alison. But what am I to do?"

"Try to draw better, think for yourself, choose your own subjects, Jerry. Of course it is right to please your father, but he doesn't understand an artist's outlook. He seems to rule you, body and soul."

"Ne-ow—I mean no," said Jerry, remembering her correction. "I give way to the old man 'cos he makes such a row if I don't. But look 'ere! I'm going to chuck it pretty soon——" he dropped his voice and glanced towards the door—"I'm sick of it, and if it wasn't for old Mum I should have cut off years ago, d'reckly after leaving school."

"Are you going to run away, Jerry?" cried Alison, with brightening eyes.

"Shut up! Somebody'll hear you. Not exactly. I'm going to go down to my uncle Charlie—Mum's brother Charlie—at Chepstow. He's got an hotel, you know, and he'll give me a job. At least, I s'pose he will when I get there."

"But you don't want to be an hotel keeper, Jerry."

"No such luck! I shall offer to help in the bar. I wouldn't mind that. I could soon make some money in my own way at a pub."

"Oh, Jerry!"

"Only just to get on at first, Miss Alison. Don't look so glum. After a few years I'll be a great artist, if you like."

"It isn't if *I* like, Jerry dear. You can't make yourself a great artist to please me."

"Why not?" asked the boy. "The other night I heard you telling Mrs. Booker you meant to be a popular writer to please her."

"A popular writer is very different from a great artist," said Alison, smiling; "besides, I was only joking. I know my own limitations. Can you believe, Jerry, I've been writing for over four years? Four years! Isn't it an age?"

Jerry only nodded his head. He was not at all interested in Alison's work.

Four years! The words repeated themselves in her mind. She had been free-lancing for so long—so long—and seemed as far from fame and fortune as on the day when she earned her first seven and sixpence with her first short story.

(The editor of the little paper in which it had appeared had offered her half a guinea. When she wrote, to protest at the reduction in the pay, he gravely replied that on reading her contribution a second time he had come to the conclusion it was worth only seven and six. Alison had cried at the time, but often laughed about it afterwards).

The *Arrow* had started a year after the beginning of her literary life. Barrington had not been its first assistant editor. She had known him for nearly two years.

Alison had lately begun to wish they had never met, although she did not realize how his friendship—his fitful affection—was dominating her life. She believed in him, never allowing herself to judge him hardly or blame him for treating her as he did. She would as soon have called him villain as philanderer.

Alison's outward bearing was not affected, at this time, by the undercurrent of her baffling emotions. That she secretly cared so much for Barrington Chase—"cared" she said to herself, not "loved"—made no difference in her home devotion.

She was more patient with uncle Jonah, more gay with Jerry, more kind to her mother, in her growing

belief that Barrington "cared" for her. She worked at her novel every day, often depressed, often excited, always absorbed in its progress.

The monotony of the days in Courtley Gardens did not pall upon her, although she chafed a little at her mother's continual work. It was impossible for the successful girl of twenty four—and Alison was very successful with her bright little interviews and dramatic little tales—to understand the haunting fears of a life of poverty.

Mrs. Brooker tried in vain to throw them off. In her secret heart, much as she admired and overrated her child, she could not believe that a pen and a sheet of paper could vanquish the spectre of Want. Only once she had shown the old wounds of her heart to Alison.

They were talking of money, and the girl was urging her to spend instead of save. She wanted new clothes, uncle Jonah was "disgracefully shabby," Alison herself had a hundred wishes unfulfilled.

Mrs. Booker listened in silence, her slender hands clasped tightly on her knees, her deep-set eyes hidden by their drooping lids. Alison grew impatient. Barrington Chase had criticised her copy severely on the previous day. Her nerves were all on edge.

It is one of the mysteries of life how cruel we can be to those whom we love. Alison was cruel to her mother. It was only in a dozen words—quick as a flash, sharp as a lancet—but she will remember them to her dying day, for Mrs. Booker suddenly looked at her with an expression on her face of unspeakable pain and appeal.

"Oh, Alison, it is only for your sake, my darling! I want to leave you something more, when I die, than my old, worn out bones."

Then she clasped her hands over her face to hide the tears that suddenly streamed from her eyes.

Alison had rarely seen her cry. The simple, bald

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words smote and shocked her daughter to the heart. It was one of the most poignant minutes of her youth, never to be forgotten. Long afterwards, when her hour of renunciation came, she realized that it was first conceived as she clung to her mother in love and remorse, at the awakening of self-knowledge, when she was a girl.

That night, as they sat alone after uncle Jonah had gone to bed, Mrs. Booker talked to Alison of the past. The barrier between them of difference in age and experience, in character and outlook, was swept away.

Alison saw her mother's life with a new sympathy and understanding. The sadness and stern reality of this world took possession of her mind for the first time; it was easy to talk and read of disillusion, but to feel its bitter truth moved the sensitive girl to passionate grief.

Her mother was surprised and self-reproachful. She had described her married life with the calm lack of reserve which only the women who are habitually reticent display once, perhaps twice, in a lifetime.

The love between her husband and herself had survived, for a long time, the perpetual clash of their widely differing temperaments. Alison was the child of her father's stormy, unhappy, but irresistible passion and her mother's lingering tenderness. She was born in the fourth year of their marriage.

The man—difficult, moody, profound, but undisciplined and melancholy—had darkened his wife's bright spirit and saddened her heart. But he was the one—strange paradox of humanity!—whom she would have chosen again, in spite of everything, if her life could have been repeated.

The tragedy of their love and misery passed into the nature of their child, blending the warring elements between them, but never at perfect peace. Alison was rarely happy, except when she was writing. She inherited her mother's pessimism in trifles,

her father's optimism in greater matters. Always daydreaming, in spite of necessity having made her practical, she already lived in the past. When she was a child of seven she had gravely told Mrs. Booker that her greatest pleasure was talking over old times.

It was this inherent sadness in her nature that enabled her to bear the continual doubt and mental strain of Barrington Chase's vague attachment. She set no value on herself. Humbly grateful for his kindness and absolutely relying on his judgment of her work, Alison depended upon him more and more, and he tacitly made her feel that she was bound to him and his paper by the strongest ties of gratitude.

He appreciated her and never undervalued what she did, but always assumed the character of a master, graciously pleased with her efforts and accepting her devotion to the *Arrow* and its interests as a matter of course.

"I am loyal to my Chief," he frequently told Alison; "And I know you are loyal to me."

Mr. Chase did not talk in this way to other contributors, but he felt that his Green Room Gossiper really understood her responsibilities. Absurd as it appeared on looking back, after years had passed, Alison took herself so seriously at this time that she almost looked upon the success of the *Arrow* as a sacred trust—a Cause—to be upheld and maintained at any sacrifice. She was proud to be connected with it, honestly believing that its failure would end her career as a writer. London without the *Arrow* would be a dreary waste. The *Arrow* without Barrington Chase—no! That was a prospect too terrible to put into words.

Alison's life was monotonous, although the Green Room interviews took her into unknown houses, and she met a number of strangers. But interviewing was peculiarly impersonal work. It turned her from a woman into a weekly paper.

She became very difficult to know at all intimately, having mistaken, at first, courtesies offered to the *Arrow* interviewer as intended for herself as an individual. It was trying, when she accepted an invitation to be asked in a whisper, as she said good-bye, to be sure to pop a line about the uninteresting little tea party into next week's *Arrow*. It was even more annoying to be warned, on the rare occasions when she chanced to meet an interviewee at a friend's house, not to publish his private affairs. Everybody seemed to look upon an interviewer as devoid of tact and good taste.

She complained of this to Barrington Chase.

"It makes me very lonely to meet so many strangers," said Alison. "They don't treat me as a person, but as a paper."

"You should think of them all as 'copy,' my dear Miss Booker," he answered.

"But I should like to know a few of these people for their own sakes. Life isn't all 'copy' and 'stuff' and 'local colour.'"

"There speaks the woman, not the journalist," observed Mr. Chase, in his most urbane manner. "To anyone like myself there is no interest beyond my work. I know I am more single-hearted and capable of concentration than the majority of people. Perhaps I am too absorbed, too conscientious. If I thought of my own interests more, and the affairs of the *Arrow* less, I should stand in a very different position."

"Will you write books if you ever give up your present work?" asked Alison, eagerly.

"M—yes. Yes! Not fiction. I should not attempt fiction. It doesn't appeal to me. Don't think I am disparaging the efforts of our novelists of the future——" he bent forward in the swivel chair to squeeze her hand for a moment—"but as a student of economics and social problems, those subjects would naturally employ my pen."

"I'm sure social problems are discussed in modern novels, Mr. Chase."

"Not in yours, I hope? The charm of your short stories lies in their fresh and pure atmosphere. I don't want you to write books about ugly and sordid topics. Don't be realistic, little lady! Keep to poetry and romance."

"Isn't there poetry and romance in the realism of life, Mr. Chase?"

"I'm afraid not. The more I see of life, Miss Booker, the more it shocks and pains me."

"That's very sad," sighed Alison.

"Shocks and pains me," he repeated, in a tone that was meant to suggest dark and terrible experience, awakening pity and wonder in her frightened, feminine mind.

"That is why I entreat you to write your long book in the same spirit as your little tales," continued Barrington; "There is too much morbidity and gloom in the air. I want you to belong to the old school that is ever new—the healthy, happy English school—and perhaps I shall live to congratulate my little comrade on being one of the best sellers of the century!"

A line from Othello flashed into Alison's brain, "O, most lame and impotent conclusion!" but it was forgotten as he looked at her with the too intimate, possessive glance she knew so well in his brown eyes. She struggled to meet it indifferently for a few seconds, but failed.

"Why do you always turn away from me when I look into your bright eyes?" said Barrington Chase.

Alison only smiled faintly and did not answer.

Gentle happiness, like a little wave, rippled towards her from the wide sea of her loneliness. She was enchanted by the man's caressing voice and his touch. So she had always imagined love, considerate and restrained, mistaking his silence, so unusual in Barrington, for deep emotion.

A long minute was fraught with great possibilities. It hung between Alison's past and future, wondrous to recall. Then it was gone, for he suddenly dropped her hand and drew away. He seemed to avoid her questioning eyes with strange repugnance, or anger, until he smiled once more.

"I know why you won't look at me—foolish girl!" said Barrington, softly; "You think I am only flattering you, but your literary career is of the greatest importance to me. I feel that I have been able—have I?—to help you a little now and then."

She made no reply. He went on speaking, rather too hastily, a little confusedly, to give her time. He repeated the pompous words that her literary career was of vast importance to him; if he had ever seemed a censorious critic it was only seeming; the last little tale she had sent to the *Arrow* was a gem, a gem of the first water; when she became a popular novelist she must try to remember that he had always foretold her success—and so on and so on, completely recovering his habitual manner.

Alison chimed in, long before he had come to a full stop, with the expected gratitude for all his kindness and encouragement. Barrington's relief made him earnest in his editorial praise of her.

"If I can help you in any practical way with the great novel, when it is finished, you mustn't hesitate to ask me. Perhaps a personal note to a publisher—a word in season, you know——" he said, fidgeting in the swivel chair; "You mustn't be too proud to call upon your friends, Miss Booker, especially an old friend like myself. I think I can be a useful friend. I know I'm a faithful one."

Barrington paused for her to agree. Friendship was one of his favourite themes. He held forth upon it for the remainder of her call, telling anecdotes of his many friends in journalism, and of the unswerving attachment of the friends of his school days and early youth, but women friends—how he valued

them!—were named as the most to be relied on. He grew quite sentimental and foolishly garrulous over their constancy.

A great weariness of spirit oppressed Alison when she was alone in the street, after a lingering farewell. It was as if her "friend" had exhausted her vitality, leaving her physically and mentally weak. But she did not blame him, although she allowed herself to wonder at the great difference between his words and his manner. Which to believe? There was a problem she would have given years of her life to solve.

Alison's mood of depression changed when the talk of friendship—the futile, one-sided, endless talk—had slipped into yesterday. She trusted and hoped once more that he cared for her.

"Be patient! Be true! Be loyal!" she thought; "Time will prove——"

CHAPTER IV

Alison finds out how Jerry Cuff earns his money. She meets again with Chichester. Uncle Jonah in caricature.

THE Spring had gone and Summer was in bloom before Alison discovered Jerry Cuff's secret.

Jerry had not carried out his threat of leaving home, for the very good reason that his uncle, the hotel proprietor from Chepstow, had paid a visit to Courtley Gardens and Jerry's hints had not been at all well received.

An unknown uncle in the distance was very different from the same article near at hand; even his way of asking how "this big young fellow" was earning a living discouraged Jerry. He told Alison he had made up his mind to stick to poor old Dad and Mum.

One Summer evening Alison made an excursion, to see a new turn by an interviewee, to Robins's Music Hall in Hampstead Road.

She spent an hour in the audience, half an hour behind the scenes, and then made her escape. As a rule she had no objection to the 'alls, but it was a hot night, windless and thunderous, and Robins's was like a big, unwholesome oven. The tobacco smoke of Robins's patrons in front clung to her clothes and hair; the smell of grease paint, scent and drinks of Robins's artists behind was in her nostrils; the crash-bang of Robins's orchestra still seemed to box her

ears, and the inanity and vulgarity of Robins's high class programme had depressed her spirits.

She walked in the direction of Oxford Circus, interested in all she saw, and observant of the trifles which made her stories of London so true in detail and incident.

Two crowds at the corner of bye-streets, at a short distance from each other, made her stop to find out their cause.

At the first and smaller one the people were listening stolidly to a professor of phrenology, who offered delineation of character, for a penny, by putting a mark against different attributes on a printed slip, according to the method—he said—of the leading “skientists of the day.”

A butcher boy had just invested his money as Alison came up, and the professor was ticking him off with great speed:—

“Now, sir, gen’ral abilities good—fond o’ sport and all manly games—let me have a look at your profile—would do well in trade, pol’tics, or really respectable walks of life—fon’ o’ the ladies—(the butcher boy grinned and an elderly dame with a beer jug was convulsed) I should say you’d succeed—lemme see—in the meat business—oh, you’re in it now, are you? I didn’t observe it——” tick, tick tick. “There you are, sir! Guide for life—o’ny a penny, ladies——”

Alison did not secure a front place in the next crowd. She could not see what was going on, being jostled by some inquisitive little girl almost into the arms of a tall man who was trying, like herself, to edge forward without pushing.

“I beg your pardon!” she said, in that peculiarly aloof manner that the Londoner uses when apologizing to strangers.

“Not at all, it was my fault—I’m sorry,” returned the tall man, as a shove from the other side thrust her on to him again.

They glanced at each other, smiling at the second

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attack, and vague recognition came into his face. Alison knew him at once.

It was George Chichester, the artist who owned the lovely orchard she remembered so well.

"Mr. Chichester?" she said; "I went to see you at your house in Esher, last Spring, for the weekly paper called the *Arrow*."

"The *Arrow*?" he repeated in a puzzled voice, then held out his hand; "Of course I recollect you very well. Miss—er—Books?"

"Not quite so literary a name as that," said Alison, smiling again; "Alison Booker. I hope you liked my little interview. I think I sent you a copy."

"Oh, capital! Capital! Do you know, Miss Booker—but let us stand a little bit farther back on the pavement. Really, the curiosity of young people in this neighbourhood is positively savage. I had a good place a few minutes ago, in front, but a brutal little boy of about six belaboured me out of it with a hoop stick."

They moved into the wide doorway of an empty house. Allison was glad to exchange a few words, even with an interviewee she had seen only once before, especially as he remembered her and his manner was so much more friendly than when they first met.

Her impression of the artist changed as she looked at him a second time. He was older than she had imagined, more wrinkled and careworn, but still a handsome man at the best time of his life.

"I was going to tell you, Miss Booker, that your interview was a very delightful surprise to me," said Chichester; "I had no idea it could be done so—so—successfully and gracefully after such a brief talk."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Chichester."

"You hardly made a single note," he went on; "I couldn't help wondering what in the world you were going to write about. In fact, I said to my wife, after you were gone, 'That poor girl has wasted her afternoon.'"

"I expect Mrs. Chichester said I had wasted *your* afternoon, which was more to the point."

He did not deny it. Mrs. Chichester had called Miss Booker "a plain little ninny who evidently didn't know her business."

The artist was interested in Alison's work, although he did not speak of the *Arrow* with the respect and gravity which she thought it deserved. He asked her ingenuous questions; expressed his opinion of different successful plays with engaging indifference to the popular verdict. When they touched on music Alison felt her ignorance, for it was a world into which she could not follow him. It was a relief to return to her own subject.

Mr. Chichester was amused to hear she had been visiting behind the scenes at Robins's. He knew little of music halls, but shared her admiration for dancers and acrobats.

Alison became so interested in their talk that she forgot the little crowd until her companion spoke of it.

"Have you seen the work of our young friend yonder? A novelty, I take it, for a street show."

"I don't know what you mean," said Alison.

"To be sure! You had only just appeared upon the scene when we met. It is encouraging for me to find a fellow artist so extremely popular on the highroad."

"Are the people looking at a street artist?" asked Alison, in surprise; "I have never before seen one of them manage to collect a crowd."

"No, but this is an original showman. As a rule street artists are too humble. They crouch upon the ground and spoil their chances of coppers by proclaiming it is all their own work. But this boy has a manager, he works at an easel and sits on a camp-stool."

"Oh, let me look at him!" cried Alison, excitedly; "I must see him at once. Can't we push through the

crowd? I only want a glimpse. Why am I so absurdly short?"

"Stand on tip-toe," suggested Chichester, laughing at her unaccountable eagerness.

"I am standing on tip-toe now, but it's no good."

An idea occurred to Chichester, but he hesitated before speaking.

"Will you allow me—just for a minute—put your elbows against your sides—nonsense, I shan't feel your weight—how's that?"

Almost before she could protest he had stepped behind and lifted her, easily and lightly, to look over the heads of the crowd.

"It's Jerry!" exclaimed Alison.

Chichester held her up with such steady hands that she could see well at her leisure.

Jerry was perched on the campstool working away at his easel, with Mr. Cuff beside him, holding a red velvet bag outstretched, the expression on his face suggesting the gravity of a sidesman taking the collection in church and the patience of a blind man's dog begging for coppers. He spoke now and again, but Alison could not hear him.

Jerry, with the curly back of his head towards the people, in the velvet suit and white collar, looked like a very young boy. He was pretending to work on his portrait of King Edward VII, putting in a touch here and there with unnecessary flourishes of the brush. There was an old palette in his left hand, and he frequently leaned back with his head on one side to judge his progress.

Alison was so amused and interested that she accepted Mr. Chichester's kindness as a matter of course.

"I know that boy," she said, when the artist gently lowered her to her feet; "He lives in our house in Courtley Gardens. Do you think we could get close to him? Please don't trouble to come with me."

"Oh, yes, I will."

Chichester left the doorway and began edging through the crowd towards the easel. It was not difficult, for many of the people waited only long enough to stare and recognize the portrait.

Mr. Cuff's little peeping eyes picked out his landlady's daughter very quickly. His first impulse was to pretend not to know her, but he changed his mind, when she nodded, and greeted her with a cheerful smile, touching the brim of the old brown hat with one finger.

"Let us make for the right side of the easel," said Mr. Chichester; "Then our young friend will be able to see us."

When they had reached this point of vantage Jerry was as quick as his father in recognizing Alison. There was an instant flush of colour under his fair skin, but he did not hesitate to bow gravely and even flourish his brush in her direction. Then he turned his head towards Mr. Cuff and said a few words under his breath.

"All serene!" returned his father.

Jerry put the brush into his palette hand and ran his fingers through his hair in an abstracted manner, looking up at the sky, as if the world and the populace were unworthy of his gaze, while Mr. Cuff removed King Edward and put a board with a clean piece of paper on the easel. He then addressed the crowd in so loud a voice that his face grew purple-red with the effort—"Looks as if he'd bust!" whispered a sympathetic woman to her friend—and obliged him to emphasize the wrong words and make long pauses in the middle of his sentences:—

"Ladies and gentlemen. Some of you may not believe that these pictures: *are* the genuine work of this: little lad. Some of you may believe as how: we have purchased these canvases from famous artists of the day. ('Hear hear!' said Chichester, loudly.) So we will prove the truth; of our *aspirsions* (Mr. Cuff meant assertions, but he was so very much out

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of breath). The little lad 'as a clean sheet : of droring paper *now* on the easel. He will make an original, funny picture : on that clean sheet : of droring paper. You can see him doing of it : *with* your eyes."

"That's a good point," said Chichester ; " Let us watch him carefully with our eyes."

Jerry gave up the palette and took a stick of chalk out of his pocket. First of all he drew an oblong, black object, rather like a piece of tube, and wrote above it—"What is this?"

A few people in the crowd gave answers. A girl exclaimed that it was a flower-pot; a navvy said it was a jug without a handle, and the sympathetic woman thought it might be a coffin standing long-ways.

Jerry ignored their suggestions, and put a brim to the black object, turning it at once into a man's high hat. Then he rapidly sketched a grotesque head wearing the hat, and added a hand holding up an umbrella. It was ugly, absurd and out of drawing, but unmistakable—uncle Jonah.

Alison was not touchy and she laughed, but her good taste—her affection—some quality she could not define—was a little offended for all that. She did not show it to Jerry, but gave him the approving smile his glance demanded.

He spoke to his father at once. They argued a minute in low voices. Then Mr. Cuff evidently gave way and proclaimed that the exhibition would now close, following up the announcement with a hasty, final passing round of the bag.

"Astonishing little lad, sir," observed Mr. Cuff, indicating Jerry, who was packing up the exhibition.

Silver coins from Chichester made Mr. Cuff recognize Miss Booker's friend as an art patron.

"Very astonishing little lad!" said Chichester, emphasizing the words with a glance at Jerry's long legs and disgusted face. He had overheard his father's remark.

"We do this partly as a nobby, partly for him to gain experience," said Mr. Cuff.

"Do you mean of public taste?" asked Chichester, absently, as he watched Alison shaking hands with Jerry.

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Cuff; "When my boy is a little older I intend to give him a reg'lar education for the trade."

"What? House-painting?" said Chichester, in the same tone.

"No, sir, picture painting. He took to that like a young duck to water," said Mr. Cuff, warming with his subject; "Of course it mayn't be so steady as—well, as sign painting, for instance, but there's openings in it for real talent. You mayn't believe it, sir, but a friend of mine who is an artis' makes his cool three hundred a year, taking one year with another."

"Does he though?"

"Of course he's very lucky and at the top of the tree. There aren't many of 'em like him. They're gen'rally a lazy, shiftless lot, sir."

"No doubt," said Chichester, and he joined Alison and the boy.

Jerry proved to be communicative. He answered Mr. Chichester's questions bashfully, but with a certain quick intelligence that was not lost upon the well known artist. Alison was very pleased with him, for he talked freely to the stranger, anxious to make a good impression, but with due modesty and respect.

When Mr. Chichester asked for his name and address, with a promise to advise and help him, Jerry was evidently very grateful and surprised.

Alison might have been a little disappointed if she could have overheard the following remarks, and the tone in which they were exchanged between her friend and Mr. Cuff on their homeward journey:—

"He talked like a reg'lar swell, that gentleman with Miss Booker, though his clothes didn't look it, Jerry."

"He's not a swell. He's only an old artist, Dad."

"You seemed very pleased when he offered to give you some tips about your work, my lad."

"Becos he can learn me all sorts of things, Dad. He's rich and he's got on. I mean to stick to him."

* * * * *

George Chichester and Alison parted at Tottenham Court Road. She had not accepted the offer of Mr. Cuff's escort home. The artist was sorry to leave her. She was amused at his distress that she should have to go such a long way by herself, for he seemed to be as vague about the distance to West Kensington or Hammersmith as if they were unknown lands.

"By the way, Mr. Chichester," said Alison, as they shook hands, "I suppose all the blossoms and other Spring flowers have long disappeared from your beautiful orchard."

"We ought to be gathering the fruit in a couple of months, but it doesn't look very hopeful this year. So you remember my orchard?"

"I shall never forget how lovely it was in the Spring. Good luck made me choose the day of its perfection for your interview."

"Well, come to see me again when you can spare time, Miss Booker. Give me a day's notice, that's all, and I shall be delighted to welcome you."

"I'm afraid I mustn't write another column in the *Arrow* just yet, Mr. Chichester," said Alison, finding it difficult to believe that he should have invited her for her own sake.

"I should hope not!" exclaimed the artist, looking positively alarmed; "That little paper of yours is perpetually in your mind. I suppose it's like my pictures, all-absorbing. Don't forget to look me up. My wife will be very pleased to see you again," he added, as an after-thought.

Alison thanked him sincerely and they parted.

She thought much of his kindness and cordiality

during her journey home, forgetting Robins's and even Jerry Cuff's secret in recalling his pleasant voice, air of friendliness and evident amusement at her devotion to the *Arrow*.

Alas! It was not the *Arrow* which haunted her mind, but the *Arrow's* editor. Whatever she did, or wherever she went, the troubled girl was conscious of the thought-form—the spectral presence as it were—of Barrington Chase, now attracting, now repelling, but always holding his own in the background of her mind.

CHAPTER V

A new "let" in Mrs. Booker's house. The arrival of Rosamond Courtley. First impressions. "Like a fresh wind from the country far away."

JERRY CUFF met Alison with a defiant air on the following morning.

He expected her to look upon him with contempt, but when he discovered she was simply amused and surprised by her adventure of the previous night he began to be proud of himself.

"I thought you would be too stuck up to talk to a street artist," he said, "though I don't see why a fellow shouldn't show off his pictures out of doors as well as in a studio."

"It is your pictures themselves, not the way you exhibit them, I object to," she answered.

"I know! But that friend of yours, Mr. Chichester, will soon teach me to improve myself," said Jerry, cheerfully.

"Are you going to write to him for his serious advice?" cried Alison.

"I wrote a letter last night. I say! Will you look it over? It's no good asking the old people. Mum said I ought to tell him where I was born and all about our respectable relations—rot! And Dad thought I'd better say I'll make it worth his while if he'll introduce me to some of his own connection. But I suppose that wouldn't do?" said Jerry.

"No, it wouldn't do at all," said Alison, decidedly. She read the letter. It was not too long and fairly well expressed.

She was sensible enough to correct only the spelling, leaving Jerry's lack of style to speak for itself.

"By the way, I wish you would tear up that ugly sketch you made last night of my uncle," said Alison.

"Sorry, I can't. I gave it to the old boy this morning."

"Do you mean your father?"

"No, the other old dodger. Your uncle, Miss Alison."

"Oh, Jerry, it may hurt his feelings, and what will my mother say?"

"That's all right. Mrs. Booker thought it was a scream, and the old gentleman howled with joy," said Jerry.

Alison found that her mother's scream had been a mild laugh. Uncle Jonah's howl was a chuckle that lasted him all the day.

"Oh, it's a fine likeness!" said the old gentleman, when his niece appeared.

Mrs. Booker had pinned the objectionable sketch on the wall and he was taking his breakfast opposite to it, sitting in one chair with his cup and plate on another.

"Don't you consider it a fine likeness, Ally?" he asked.

"No, uncle Jonah. It doesn't do you justice," she replied, laughing in spite of herself at the absurd scrawl.

"Never mind me, my dear. Look at the hat! I've never seen a better likeness of a hat, or of an umbrella. I should have known that was meant for my umbrella if I'd seen it in a shop window in the middle of Africa," said uncle Jonah, solemnly.

"Perhaps Master Jerry has drawn caricatures on the sly of you and me too, Ally," said Mrs. Booker.

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"If he dared to caricature you, dearest, I'd tear it into a hundred pieces!" exclaimed Alison.

"I should be a very good subject with my screw of hair and severe clothes," observed Mrs. Booker, with a quick glance at the mirror.

"Then why don't you do your hair differently, Mother, and buy some pretty clothes?" asked Alison, hurt by the words and tone.

"Oh, no. I'm accustomed to my smooth little groove and I don't want to get out of it, Ally."

"We're all in a groove more or less," said Alison, sighing; "You do the same things day after day, and my writing is practically the same week after week. As for uncle Jonah—Mother! how many million times do you think uncle Jonah stirs his tea in the course of a year?"

She jerked her chair on one side to avoid the sight of the old man's spoon going round and round and round his cup. Sometimes, in very aggravation, she had timed him and found that he gave every piece of sugar at least three minutes' stirring. This would not have been so bad with an ordinary amount of sweetening, but he had his own little bowl of broken lumps for the pleasure of putting in a tiny bit after every sip of tea.

"Would you like to move?" asked Mrs. Booker; "That would make a great change for you, dearie."

"Move? Go away from Courtley Gardens?" said Alison; "What is the use of talking like that? We can't afford a better house and now that we have good lodgers it would be foolish to risk losing them. You know we can't move, Mother," she went on, plaintively; "We have put up with this place for ten years, and I suppose we can endure it for another ten."

"You may be married long before then, my dear," said Mrs. Booker.

The girl looked up in some surprise. Her mother hardly ever spoke of marriage, and Alison had never discussed the possibility with her.

"I don't expect to be married, Mother dear, unless —"

She stopped and felt her cheeks turning hot, half hoping, half dreading to be questioned. But Mrs. Booker abruptly changed the subject.

"I have heard of a young lady for the top rooms, Ally. The doctor's wife called yesterday to ask whether we still had them to let. You know I mentioned to Dr. Sinclair, when he came to see your uncle, our old tenant had left."

"Who is the young lady, Mother?"

"Mrs. Sinclair was rather vague. You know her way! But she said a friend had introduced them and the references were excellent. She thought the girl was studying for some profession or trade."

"That's promising," said Alison; "We've got a pavement artist on the ground floor, and perhaps we shall have a young person who sings in the street, or sells flowers, at the top of the house."

"My dear Ally! The doctor's wife says Miss Courtley is the daughter of a country vicar."

"Miss Courtley, Mother?"

"Yes, she has the same name as our street. Isn't it a curious coincidence? She is coming to see the rooms to-morrow afternoon, with Mrs. Sinclair. I wish you could be at home. I'm such a 'Joan blunt' with strangers."

"I can't, really I can't. Mr. Chase expects me at the office."

"Put him off for once, Ally. You're always at his beck and call. Last time you went, by special appointment, he was too busy to see you."

"He wrote afterwards to apologize, Mother. It is impossible for me to give up my engagement to-morrow," said Alison, coldly.

"Very well, dear. I must do my best without you."

Mr. Chase was not too busy to see Miss Booker on the following afternoon, which more than atoned for

her self-reproach at leaving her mother to meet, judge, and accept or refuse the new lodger on her own responsibility.

Barrington had been to a first night at the St. James's Theatre, and was anxious to discuss a problem play with Alison. He relied on her opinion more than she supposed, and, having arranged to write a long criticism himself, he wanted to know whether they agreed on the main points of the story.

After telling her all about it, he found that her ideas differed from his own. They talked at great length, Alison trying to see the subject from his viewpoint, Barrington considerably showing her how a man's broader mind solved the problem by denying its existence.

They parted on the best of terms.

Alison thought, as she left the office, of a certain ceremony that she happened to have seen mentioned in the morning paper:— "The new Minister was received by His Majesty and kissed hands on his appointment."

The acting editor of the *Arrow* had received his Green Room contributor as if he had just endowed her with a grand appointment and it was necessary to kiss hands—but in his case the king did the kissing—not once, but many times.

Barrington's fondness for holding, and lately kissing, her hand was a little strange to Alison. She supposed it pleased him, but her unlucky eye for the ridiculous made the pleasure one-sided. Neither of them spoke of the difference in his editorial greeting before others and his manner when they were alone.

At times she had felt a subtle humiliation in the care with which he hid their friendship—affection—what was it to be called?—from the curious, but it was a feeling that passed and was instantly forgotten.

* * * * *

Alison found her mother and uncle Jonah at the

parlour window, waiting for her, when she returned to Courtley Gardens.

"We've let the rooms, Ally!" said Mrs. Booker, directly she opened the room door.

"Oh, she's a beauty, my dear!" cried uncle Jonah; "She's as pretty as a peacock and as fine as a bird of Paradise, and I'd take my 'affy davey' she's a good 'let.'"

Alison kissed her mother and they congratulated each other.

"I am very pleased with Miss Courtley," said Mrs. Booker; "She is going to have the ceilings of the two rooms whitewashed and will distemper the walls herself. Mrs. Sinclair asked if she knew how to do it, she laughed and said no, but it was easy to find out. She has the merriest laugh, Ally."

"Just like a bird of Paradise," repeated the old man.

"I've never heard any bird laugh, uncle Jonah," said Alison, laughing herself; "But I'm very glad you like the girl. What does she do for a living, Mother?"

"She is attending a school for weaving and means to set up her own loom a little later on. It seems she had a legacy last year from a lady——"

"She said it was her fairy godmother," put in uncle Jonah.

"—And she has come to London to look round her."

"Is she a country vicar's daughter as Mrs. Sinclair told you?"

"Well, it isn't a vicar, but a curate. She has five brothers and sisters, and she says they are all good-looking and high-spirited——"

"She said little demons," put in uncle Jonah again.

"—Her mother is an Irishwoman, but her father's people live in Cornwall, although Courtley is not a Cornish name."

68 THE FRUITLESS ORCHARD

"The young lady was communicative," said Alison, beginning to think she had talked too much; "When is she going to move in?"

"She begins to pay next Monday, but it seems her landlady, where she is lodging now, met with an accident and Miss Courtley has offered to nurse her until a married daughter arrives from the country."

"Perhaps the married daughter will not arrive for weeks, or months, as Miss Courtley is so very obliging, Mother."

The more she heard of the new "let," the more Alison was inclined to be anxious about her. As uncle Jonah said, she seemed too good to be true.

The Bookers looked for her in vain all through the following week. She did not appear until Saturday afternoon.

A furniture van drew up to the door. There was a young woman sitting beside the driver, with a small cat in her arms. Uncle Jonah hurried to the window at the sound of stopping wheels.

"Here she is at last! Goody! Goody!" piped the old gentleman.

Mrs. Cuff was looking out of the window on the ground floor with equal interest, but the unfortunate day of the week made her open her door to say to Alison, as she ran downstairs:—

"Saturday flittin',
Short sittin'!"

Alison stood at the top of the steps to welcome the new lodger. Miss Courtley climbed lightly down from the seat, after tucking the cat under her arm.

She was a tall girl, with dark hair and eyes. Although her complexion was pale, her lips soft, and her expression in repose gravely thoughtful, she gave the impression of vivid beauty—fine health, delicate strength, vitality and absolute self-possession.

Rosamond Courtley was too handsome a girl, once seen, to be easily forgotten. Alison was sure they had met before, but for the minute she was ignorant of the time and place.

The driver did not trouble to turn the back of his van towards the house, for it contained such a small amount of furniture. He unloaded, and carried the things upstairs, with leisurely amusement at the smallness of the job.

All Miss Courtley's interest and anxiety seemed to be centred in an old fashioned spinning wheel and two small picture frames, carefully wrapped in brown paper.

"I couldn't hire a small van, Miss Booker, and even my few pieces of furniture would have been too much for a cab," she said, when the man had been paid and was gone.

"Can I help you to put your rooms straight? My mother is not at home, but I shall be pleased to do whatever I can, Miss Courtley."

Alison meant to be cordial, but shyness made her sound cold, and she was very conscious of the fact that the stranger wore her decidedly old clothes much better than she, Alison, did a new dress.

"No, thanks. I can do everything quite easily myself," replied Rosamond Courtley; then, catching the slight look of disappointment in the other girl's face:— "If you can spare half an hour, after all, I shall be very grateful. This cat belongs to my landlady, but as she has gone away with her daughter I am taking care of it. These are very charming rooms——" they had reached the top of the house by this time—"I must do the walls next week. A man I know is going to help me. Oh, I love the view from this window! That straight row of poplars is as restful as a long sleep on a Summer day. Look! There's a robin redbreast!"

She had thrown open the window of the little back room and beckoned eagerly to Alison, who was

standing awkwardly just within the door, to look out with her.

They leaned on the sill close together, and Alison was aware of a very faint perfume, as if the wind upon her face had blown across a distant garden of mignonette. It was associated in a minute, and ever afterwards, with Rosamond in Alison's mind.

Directly the scent of mignonette comes to her she is a girl again, leaning on the window-sill of the old house in Courtley Gardens, shoulder to shoulder with the friend of her heart, in silence, looking at a long line of poplars.

"I'm glad you like those trees," said Alison, after a few minutes; "I have found them consoling for years, in Summer or Winter."

"Consoling?" repeated the other, with a smile; "They are dignified—grand—anything you like, but they could never console one in sorrow. Only a human being can do that."

"I think differently," said Alison; "Trees, flowers, the sparrows, even those tufts of stonecrop on the sloping roof, all seem to speak a language of consolation I can understand, though I couldn't teach it to anyone else. Does that sound very foolish to you?"

"Rather strange, perhaps, from a Londoner," replied Rosamond; "I'm a country girl, and one can imagine the woods and fields being full of mysterious and magic sounds, whispering words, but don't the bricks and mortar spoil that sort of thing? Look at the chimney-pots and back yards!"

"They can't spoil the poplars and the stonecrop."

"They have made them very grimy."

"Then perhaps it is an advantage to be short-sighted. I see the shape and colour of things, but not the grime."

"You're a philosopher, Miss Booker."

Alison felt that this bromadic remark ended the subject. She turned her head to look at Rosamond's

face so close to her own. Its warmth of colouring and the long eye-lashes charmed her sense of beauty. She saw how the irises of her eyes were hazel-dark, luminous, restless eyes with an expression wholly frank and conscious of many conquests. Rosamond meant to please this serious girl, for she liked to be liked by all women and admired by all men. She had set herself an easy task, although Alison Booker was not quite so simple as her new friend imagined.

It was flattering to be consulted about the placing of every chair, or ornament, but she soon discovered that Miss Courtley did exactly as she chose all the same. In words she deferred to her companion, in actions she was ruled, even in trifles, entirely by her own opinion.

Her few pieces of furniture were alike pretty and useful; she made the walls bright with hangings of velvet or embroidery; her three rugs were really good Chinese work, and her two pictures were a water colour drawing of her mother and a sampler, the latter faded and slightly torn. The portrait showed a handsome, but care-worn woman, exactly as Rosamond herself would have looked if time and trouble had suddenly added thirty years to her age.

"I will never hang up any portrait except this one," said Miss Courtley; "It is a speaking likeness of my mother. My brother Ronald painted it for Daddy last Christmas."

"Did your father give it to you when you came to London?" asked Alison.

"No, I 'lifted' it when Daddy was out of the room just before I started," she replied, laying a finger on her lips and smiling roguishly; "What do you think of this old sampler?"

"It is very quaint. Is the date 1817?"

"Yes, my great-great-aunt's work. I love it! Look at the little house with a dove on each chimney pot, and cherubs hovering over it on blue wings. The verse begins:—

“ ‘ Not land but learning
Makes a man complete,
Not birth but breeding
Makes him truly great,’

It is signed with the same name as mine, Rosamond Courtley, ‘ag’d 8 years.’ The old frame hangs in Daddy’s study when it’s at home.”

“ Did you ‘lift’ this too? ” asked Alison.

“ Not exactly. I persuaded them to lend it to me. Daddy’s mother gave it to him. The child who worked it was *her* mother’s aunt. See? ”

“ I think I do.”

“ The Courtleys come of a very old family, not that I care a brass farthing about that. They were Royalists in the time of the Stuarts. Daddy has a collection of old letters and household books, packed up somewhere, which belonged to a Cavalier.”

“ Oh, how interesting! ” exclaimed Alison.

“ D’you think so? They’re so difficult to read. I should never have the patience to wade through half of them.”

“ I wish I had the chance,” said Alison.

“ Really? Do you care about things and people of the past? I don’t. I never want to look backwards in any way. My great regret is that I was not fated to be born five hundred years hence. It’s so old-fashioned to belong to the end of the nineteenth century.”

“ You will be young through many years of the twentieth century,” said Alison.

“ Yes, that’s a consolation. I’m only—how old do you think? ”

Rosamond leaned both elbows behind her on the mantelpiece and looked at Alison, her whole figure, from dark hair to slender feet, expressive of youth and vigour in repose.

“ You look twenty—twenty two—but you must be older than that,” said Alison, hesitatingly; then she

exclaimed, with a sudden recollection flashing into her mind:—"I know where I first saw you, Miss Courtley! It was months and months ago near Charing Cross. Do you remember that we looked at each other as we passed? It was at night. I must have been on my way home from some theatre, or interview."

"No!" said Rosamond, decidedly; "But never mind about that. So you guess my age at twenty, or twenty two? My dear, I'm on the wrong side of twenty six!"

"Older than I am?" cried Alison; "Impossible!"

"Younger than I am? Impossible!" retorted Rosamond, gaily mimicing her voice and pointing a finger at her.

"Twenty five next January, Miss Courtley."

"Then we're nearly as bad as twins, as a woman in our parish told Daddy when he asked the ages of her two youngest," said Rosamond; "I hope you're going to like me. I'm really an agreeable young woman, active and willing, besides being not wholly devoid of personal attractions."

"I think you're delightful!" said Alison, laughing.

Rosamond laughed too, with pleasure, and gave her cheek a butterfly kiss.

"The question is, will you like *me*?" asked Alison; "Let us hope so. I've been told I'm a very good friend."

"So am I—with girls."

"Only with girls?" said the other, in a puzzled voice.

"Yes, one can't be real friends with men, you know," said Rosamond, as if she were stating an undisputed fact.

"Oh, why not?"

"Perhaps I didn't express myself clearly," returned Rosamond, as she began to flit about the room again, giving it final touches; "A girl can be a friend

to a man, of course, but directly a man says he is a friend to a girl it means that he wants to be everything else—or nothing.”

“I don’t agree with you in the least,” said Alison, more earnestly than she knew; “True friendship between men and women is possible and helpful. It is one of the great joys of life.”

Barrington Chase was in her mind. She heard the echo of his words on the sweetness of her friendship.

Rosamond only laughed good-naturedly. She thought, looking at Alison’s too eager face:— “So you’re in love, are you? And you want to persuade yourself it is only friendship.” But she discreetly changed the subject, rightly suspecting that Alison was not the type of girl to give her confidence at a first meeting.

The rooms were arranged at last. Rosamond, putting on a big pinafore, sat down to her spinning wheel. Among her possessions was a sack of wool, straight from the sheeps’ backs at a farm in Devon— “the best wool in the world, Miss Booker”—and she began to work as if the whole 28 lbs. had to be sorted, washed, carded, and spun before midnight. Indeed, she was so busy that when she followed Alison downstairs, to see Mrs. Booker, it was necessary to tuck a distaff under her arm and go on working, so as not to waste ten minutes of her precious time.

“Here’s a game little spinster for you!” cried uncle Jonah.

Rosamond made a little mouth of disdain.

“I hope to be literally a spinster all my life, but I fully intend to get married,” she observed.

Her tone of assurance, everything she said and did, captivated Alison. They were friends from that hour.

A new interest and happiness had swept into the dull, quiet house in Courtley Gardens, like a fresh wind from the country far away.

CHAPTER VI

The capability of Rosamond Courtley. Alison again at the *Arrow* office. What happened when she was alone with Barrington Chase. An interruption, and thoughts of love.

IN comparing the advent of Rosamond Courtley to a fresh wind from the country, it must be remembered that there are many different winds from far away.

There is the wind from the balmy South, the strong North East, and the languorous West. There is the soft breeze of a Summer morning, and the wild hurricane of a Winter night. There is the rough, stinging wind of the sea, and the lash of a mountain gale. There is the merry flick of the wind of Autumn, whipping the fallen leaves along the roads; and the soft, airy kiss of Spring; there is the dreamy wind that whispers among the trees, and a crooning wind that stirs the rushes beside the pool—and there is a wind of words which has blown us away from Rosamond.

Alison found her new friend resembled, to apply the simile, an April breeze—welcome, but often disturbing, gusty, even boisterous.

Rosamond was kindness personified, but it was masterful kindness, authoritative, possessive. She was overwhelmingly capable; taught Mrs. Booker how to improve her work on the sewing machine; made any number of little contrivances to add to the comfort of uncle Jonah; prescribed for Mrs. Cuff's

many ailments, and instructed the charwoman so thoroughly that Mrs. Rummage gave notice, with the excuse that we all have our own way of puddlin' through our work and she couldn't take up with new fangled notions at her time of life. Mrs. Rummage added that Miss Courtley "suspected too much for her money."

Jerry Cuff fell in love with Rosamond at first sight. Alison wondered a little at the effect it had upon the boy. What had her friend done to him? All her own good advice and interest were as light as thistle-down in the scale compared with the weight of a smile, or a hint, from Miss Courtley.

Jerry's hands became clean, his boots were polished, his clothes were brushed. He wore a cheap gold ring on his little finger. The curled hair, boy's white collar and velvet suit were seen no more. He still went out with his father at night, but Mr. Cuff meekly carried the easel, stool and boards.

Jerry spent his days in listening for his mistress's step on the stairs, with the object of rushing out to meet her by accident; or in drawing her with enormous eyes and impossible lashes. But these portraits were only made to be destroyed.

Anyone less considerate and fond of him than Alison would have grown weary of his society, for when he could not approach Rosamond he devoted himself to her friend. Even when she was writing her weekly Green Room Gossip, and far too busy to talk, Jerry was content to sit on the opposite side of the table, furtively making pictures of Rosamond's head in a nimbus of little dots on a piece of blotting paper.

Uncle Jonah, at eighty, could not be suspected of rivalry with Jerry at eighteen, but his admiration of the new lodger was hardly less marked. All the years that Alison had taken care of him were forgotten in his gratitude for Rosamond's pretty attentions. She joked the old gentleman, made him a

nightcap that was far more comfortable than a top hat to wear in bed, and was inspired with the happy thought that he should darn his own socks. As he had a big collection of worn out socks, given up by Mrs. Booker in despair, it gave him employment for a whole Winter, especially as he insisted in working with coloured thread instead of wool.

Uncle Jonah's finished socks, as Alison said, were works of art.

Mrs. Booker was the one member of the household whose life was unchanged by Rosamond's personality. She admitted the girl's talent and charm, but firmly refused all her offers of help. She preferred her own old fashioned ways, inexplicable as it seemed to her daughter, who accepted Rosamond's endless suggestions with the gratitude of a diffident nature slow to develop and of little self-confidence.

It was only when she read the manuscript of her novel, just finished, to her beloved friend that Alison was disappointed.

Rosamond was a good listener, but a poor critic. It hurt her a little to discover, for she was far from obtuse, that she could not enter into Alison's work. The story was easy enough to follow, but the difficulties of construction and technique were beyond her ken. She could give no help, or understand Alison's intense delight, alternating with despair and hopelessness, in her book.

There were so many novels, thought Rosamond to herself, that what did it matter whether one wrote well or ill, truly or falsely, if only a publisher could be found to pay. She was ashamed to remember how quickly she read novels, three or four a week, when she saw how Alison altered and polished every chapter.

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Barrington Chase had promised to read the manuscript before it was sent into the world. Alison waited

tremblingly for his verdict. She was summoned by a non-committal postcard to the *Arrow* office. By a coincidence that seemed to her very wonderful it was the third anniversary of their first meeting.

Barrington rose from the swivel chair at her appearance, beaming, with both hands outstretched.

"Welcome, little 'Child of the Soil'!" cried the big man.

Alison's novel was called "Child of the Soil." She had never seen him look so proud of her before. He held her out at the full length of his arms, with eyes moving from her forehead to her chin, flattering and agitating her beyond words.

"A triumph!" exclaimed Barrington; "A dear little story, as fresh and sweet as the flowers that bloom in the Spring."

Then he released her, laughing at her embarrassment, dwelling on her bright blush of pleasure.

"Now, sit down beside me and let's hear all about her little plans and hopes for the future of the tale," continued Mr. Chase, regaining his editorial composure as he returned to his throne; "Who is to be the first publisher she thinks of honouring?"

Alison murmured shyly the name of Hemmerd and Co., one of the best firms in London.

"Good! She flies high, this little girl of the soil," he said, raising his eyebrows.

"Is it very conceited of me?" asked Alison.

"Not at all! Not at all! I was going to mention Hemmerds myself. I don't know Mr. Hemmerd personally, or I would write you a line."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Mr. Chase."

"Not at all! Not at all!" repeated Barrington, accepting her gratitude as if he had just arranged for the publication with Mr. Hemmerd; "I suppose you intend to re-type your manuscript? There are a few little points to which I should like to draw your attention."

Mr. Chase then gave her a dissertation on novel

writing in general and "Child of the Soil" in particular, followed by directions as to registering the parcel if she sent it by post, enclosing a carefully worded letter, packing it strongly, and preparing herself to be patient if there were no reply for many weeks, or even months.

Alison would have laughed at anybody else giving her such unnecessary instructions, but she listened humbly, as became a subject before a monarch.

Their talk on that eventful day was prolonged far beyond the official hour for contributors' visits. It drifted from books to personal affairs, chiefly of Barrington's early days in Fleet Street, the hardships being picturesquely exaggerated to arouse her sympathy and the adventures highly coloured to excite her admiration.

Few of Barrington's old colleagues would have contradicted his statements, for it is doubtful whether they would have recognized him, or themselves, in the anecdotes.

Alison's own little struggles became so insignificant, in comparison with his trials of endurance, that she marvelled at the patience with which he had occasionally listened to them.

If it had not been for the knock at the door of John, the office boy, Mr. Barrington Chase would have edited, or declined to edit, nearly every daily, weekly and monthly in London before the end of his reminiscences. So John's appearance, following the knock, was greeted with more than usual severity.

"Well?" said Mr. Chase, turning the chair an inch towards the little culprit.

"Please, sir, I'm orf," said John, unimpressed.

Mr. Chase looked at his watch and was evidently surprised at the time. John was majestically dismissed. They heard the banging of doors and the clatter of his boots on the stairs as he bolted to freedom.

Alison packed up her book while her companion

locked his desk and put on his overcoat. They seemed, by unspoken agreement, anxious to get away from the office.

Alison was conscious of being alone with him—quite alone in the deserted rooms—and the prudence, or cowardice, that dominated his character was already tormenting him with his forgetfulness of time.

They left his private room for the outer office. John had turned off all the lights, excepting one upon the wall facing the swing door.

Alison, standing at the side of the farther window-frame, looked at the hurrying crowd of the late afternoon, far below her, while Barrington Chase closed his door and fussed about for a few minutes, complaining of John's untidiness, and John's neglect of trifles, and John's general stupidity.

Mr. Chase's habitual movements and words were so deliberate that an onlooker who knew him well would have declared that he was nervous. Alison was surprised, and, turning round to study him, she became cool and self-possessed.

"Let us go," she said, suddenly, believing and hoping that he wanted her to stop with him a little longer.

"Yes, perhaps we had better leave the *Arrow* in the quiver for to-night," said Barrington, recovering his usual manner.

The electric light switch was on the wall beside the door. He turned it off, leaving the room only lighted by the fading brightness of the sunset from a strip of sky between the crowded housetops.

Alison was silhouetted against the window for a second before she crossed the room. He pushed open the swing door, holding it back with his knee for her to go out.

As she passed, her dress brushing against him, Barrington quickly, firmly threw his arm round her and she felt herself clutched to his breast.

Startled, surprised and helpless, Alison did not lose

her self-possession for a second, neither over-joyed nor thrilled, but all her senses extraordinarily keen even in the shock of his embrace. She seemed to hear his heart pulsing and the sound of his quickened breath; she felt the coarseness of his skin as he pressed her face against his neck, and the roughness of his beard; she even saw, in the flash of time before her eyes closed at his touch, the eager, changed expression—like a film—that came over his own liquid eyes.

Not a word passed between them. Alison was so passive that Barrington was enraptured. He was not a man to wait for response, or to care how such a moment affected a girl in his arms. All he asked was submission. He had allowed a sudden desire, the more imperative for long suppression, to sweep away his prudence and egotism.

Their future lives hung in the balance. Had Alison spoken—had she believed in his love a little more, or a great deal less—the passionate impulse of a minute would have led to plighted troth, the inevitable question would have been asked and answered; but it was not to be.

Barrington let her go as suddenly as he had caught her in his embrace. She leaned against the wall, looking—looking at him, with all the secret love of two years shining in her eyes. He turned his own away, not to spare her, but to save himself from their enchantment.

“Women! Women! Why do they always ask so much and give so little!” was the thought that passed through his mind.

He pulled himself together. It was not the first time his impetuous pity had been mistaken for deeper feeling. Such is the selfish stupidity of woman!

Barrington was intensely sorry for himself and angry with Alison, but still he did not meet her eyes. He knew they would mirror his own recollection of the kiss she had returned before he threw her off. It was past, but too near in sensation to be ignored.

The silence became oppressive, intensified by the growing darkness of the room.

Who can tell what would have been done and said by Barrington, in the awkwardness of the position which had been thrust upon him, if his usual good luck, or a special Providence which protects a gentleman of impetuous pity in such circumstances, had not inspired a contributor to the *Arrow* to call after office hours.

There was a heavy step, accompanied by a murmuring voice, slowly making its way up the spiral staircase. His relief instantly restored his aplomb. He crossed the room quickly and turned on the light.

"There is someone approaching. Most unusual! Most inconsiderate!" he said to Alison, still avoiding her gaze; "Don't hurry away. Miss Booker! I beg you not to hurry away—my dear, think how very —,"

Alison was surprised at the earnestness of his voice and the painful grip of his hand on her arm, not realizing how pale she looked, or that her movement of flight had been so swift and agitated.

The unknown step grew nearer, the first they saw of the visitor being a big hat gay with a pheasant's head and plumes, shading the face of a breathless lady who was encouraging herself in the long ascent by counting the stairs as she came—"five, six, seven, landing, eight, nine, ten"—and grasping a big envelope in one hand.

"Ah, to be sure. It's our Little Bird!" exclaimed Barrington.

Alison wondered for a minute whether he alluded to the dead pheasant or the lady, until she recollected a new feature in the current *Arrow*, "Chirps from the Housetops, by a Little Bird."

"Oh, Mr. Chase!" panted the visitor; "I was passing by so I thought I'd pop up with next week's Chirps."

"You're very kind, but you nearly missed me," he

replied, coldly, taking the big envelope ; " I was about to leave the office, three minutes ago, when another of our little band came in. Miss Booker—Mrs. Tuck. Now, will you two ladies—er—lead the way downstairs and allow me to close the door."

But the Little Bird was not to be despatched so quickly. She was still out of breath and meant to rest before she fluttered off. So she sat down and looked curiously round the office. Her indifference to his dismissal amazed Barrington. Had he been seated in the swivel chair he would have revolved away from her in haughty disapproval.

Alison was amused, in spite of her absorbing and vivid thoughts.

Of all people in the world to interrupt a love scene—Mrs. Tuck !

The same idea occurred to Barrington—Mrs. Tuck !—and, although he was unspeakably glad she had come, he looked upon her round, cheery face under the nodding plumes with inconsistent loathing.

Fortunately Mrs. Tuck preferred soliloquy to dialogue, for Alison felt as if she could not talk at all, and Barrington only nodded or threw in his favourite word, " Good ! " when the lady came to a pause. When Alison thought about it afterwards she had a vague notion that Mrs. Tuck had entertained them with topics as various as her latest literary efforts, fashions in hair-dressing among the ladies of the Royal Family, cartoons in *Punch*, home-made marmalade, and Victorian women novelists.

When she was thoroughly rested, and conversationally run down for the time being, the Little Bird said she must bid them good-bye. Barrington locked the office door and they all went downstairs.

Mrs. Tuck led the way. Alison did not look back, but she held her hand out behind her. Barrington, after a second's hesitation, took it in his. She felt him turn it over quickly and press his lips against the palm, but when they reached the street he was blandly

unconscious of all which had passed between them. He smiled at Mrs. Tuck and Miss Booker with equal courtesy and indifference, made a remark upon the loveliness of the evening, raised his hat and walked off.

Alison began to chat with her companion, hardly noticing what she said or heard, and accompanied her abstractedly along the Strand.

Mrs. Tuck, being one of those women who believe that there is no limit to the inside capacity of an omnibus, tried to force her way, when they reached Charing Cross, into several that were already crowded, to the indignation of their conductors. Alison watched her from the kerb, the last she saw of the Little Bird being a wild signal of farewell—or distress—from the step of a Putney bus, where she clung courageously, with the pheasant's plumes tipped over one eye.

* * * * *

It was happiness for Alison to be alone—alone with her glowing thoughts; alone with the wondrous past of an hour ago; alone with the memory of a kiss; alone with the spirit of Barrington Chase.

Barrington seemed to walk beside her, the touch of whose hand she could feel, the sound of whose voice echoed in her brain. It was not the Barrington of the *Arrow* office, enthroned in the swivel chair, pompous, benign, authoritative. He had changed into the lover of her daydreams. All her knowledge and experience of him in the past were lost in the golden haze of the future.

She was too thrilled and amazed to be definite in thought or judgment.

All plans, hopes, questions, doubts, were as broken ripples over the deep undercurrent of emotion—I am loved! I am loved!

He had never made her happy before, even in her excitement she knew that, but he would never make

her unhappy again. She could not see, poor child, the poverty of his gift of love in the recurrence of such a thought. He would never make her unhappy again; as if freedom from misery were the summit and proof of joy.

When Alison found her way at last to Courtley Gardens—no, not Courtley Gardens, but an enchanted place where she would soon welcome her lover—the night was growing late. She crept in softly, listened to her mother's voice reading to uncle Jonah, and went up to her own room unheard.

A light streamed from Rosamond's window above, as Alison saw when she raised her own, but the houses beyond the yard were all in darkness and the poplars shot up against the sky, unstirred by any wind, straight as a row of spears and sombre as the masts of a wrecked fleet.

Alison was tired and dreamy. Excess of feeling had dulled her senses; all the secret, vague longing of two years—the very heart of youth—had ended in the storm of a minute when Barrington Chase had grasped her to his heart and she knew he loved her.

In this way, leaning upon the sill, as she re-created the vital hour of the afternoon, Alison believed that the past and future, the little world of her experience and the great world beyond, were narrowed to the point of her passion. It was the promise of unknown rapture, the Self realized and triumphant, the beginning and end of existence.

So much can first love—and a kiss—dazzle and bewilder a girl of sense!

CHAPTER VII

Alison waits for the letter that never comes. Paragraphs for the *Daily Wire*. A "technical error" and what it meant to the Bookers.

It must not be thought that Alison entertained her friends with pæans in honour of Barrington Chase.

Courtley Gardens on the following morning looked very much as usual to ordinary beholders, but Alison saw it as a street to be left—some day—with Barrington. She made up her mind that Mrs. Booker must always live near to her, but as it was impossible to fit uncle Jonah into the ideal picture (the old gentleman had given up his top hat in favour of the night-cap Rosamond made, which he wore all day), she left him out of it altogether.

The future position of Mr. and Mrs. Cuff, with whom her mother had become intimate, also troubled her a little. Jerry was improvable, but what would Mr. Chase think of Mrs. Cuff's minute descriptions of her ailments, or her husband's peculiar criticisms of the Government and the Press. She often wondered whether a more ignorant man than Mr. Cuff could be found in London, or out of it.

Alison had felt no hesitation in acknowledging her interest in a street artist to George Chichester, but she would have found it difficult to tell Barrington. Rosamond Courtley was the only friend whom she looked forward to introducing to the acting editor of

the *Arrow*. She would have confided in Rosamond if it had not been for a certain directness of character in Miss Courtley that she did not know how to meet.

Rosamond was not imaginative; she might fail to understand the position of affairs, ask questions not easy to answer, even blame Barrington for indecision. How could Alison make her see that they were not engaged to each other in words, but in thought? Alison was sure of it, but too sensitive and sensible to expect her friend to share in the belief. Spoken, it became so definite. She must wait for Barrington's confirmation.

When would his letter come? Alison was intensely surprised, in after years, to remember how confidently she had looked for that first letter. If he had promised solemnly to send it, and she had known that he always kept his promises, she could not have felt more sure of him.

She had written her own first love letter on the previous night; it was sealed and hidden away; perhaps it would never be sent; perhaps they would read it together. . . .

There was no letter from Barrington by the first delivery in the morning, or the next, or the next, or at night. Twenty-four hours since they parted, and not a word.

Alison had neglected her Green Room columns for the *Arrow* at the beginning of the week. She had a short story half written on her desk. The novel, as she had packed it up at the office, was still on the corner of her dressing table where she had dropped it on returning home.

It would be so easy to work—no more dreaming—when Barrington had written. She could not do anything until then. He expected her "copy," when she did not take it herself, by a certain post on a certain day, and she had never failed him.

Alison was carrying uncle Jonah's breakfast-tray upstairs, on the second morning of her ordeal, when

the postman knocked at the door. He was a little earlier than usual. Her heart leapt. She stood still at the top of the stairs, with her eyes on the single white square on the doormat. How slowly her mother came out of the kitchen, how slowly she stooped and picked up the envelope! Oh, the joy to come——

"It's for Rosamond, dear," said Mrs. Booker, glancing up at her; "Be quick with your uncle's breakfast."

Alison carried the tray into the back room, propped the old man up with his pillows, buttered his toast, and cracked his three Brazil nuts. She did the same things in the same order every day of the year, the only difference being in the fruit and nuts in season.

"Is that all right, uncle Jonah?"

"M—yes, my dear—let me see though—you've forgotten my sugar."

"No, it is here, uncle Jonah."

"So it is! So it is! Little extra bit o' butter? Rather too much, my dear, but don't take it away. Hot water? Drop of hot milk? That's all. I'll sing out if I want anything else. Pull the door to, but don't shut it."

"Very well, uncle Jonah."

Alison leaned against the wall, outside the room, for several minutes, feeling weak and sick with hope deferred. The successful effort to check her tears made her forehead ache stingingly.

All her thoughts of Barrington were confused with amazement. Why was he so unkind? What could have happened to him? What did it all mean?

"Ally dear," said Mrs. Booker, as they sat at breakfast; "Won't you be rather rushed with your G.R.G. this week?"

"No, Mother. I can write it this afternoon, or to-morrow."

"Can't you send a few 'pars' to the *Daily Wire*? It's a long time since you did, and they generally put you in."

"Yes, Mother. I will write about one or two of my *Arrow* interviewees this week."

Mrs. Booker looked thoughtful for a while. Alison did not speak.

"Do you think it's wise to use the same people in different papers, Ally?"

"I don't know—yes, for of course I shall write about them in different ways. What does it matter?"

"You know best, dear, but think it over."

Alison did not think it over. She wrote the paragraphs for the *Daily Wire* before completing the Green Room Gossip.

A great temptation lay before her. She longed to take her "copy" to the office of the *Arrow* on the chance of seeing Barrington. She did not mean to ask for him, but he knew her usual time and surely—surely he would tell John, the office boy, to show her into his private room. Dawning pride struggled with her yearning to see him. Oddly enough she did not feel any repugnance to the man at this time. Love and reliance were not to be killed so easily.

Rosamond Courtley suspected her friend's unhappiness, and tried to find out the reason. That anyone should be reticent over a love affair was surprising to Rosamond, who talked about her own with admirable frankness. She said it was half the fun.

Alison did not dread a lack of sympathy, but the probability of harsh criticism of Barrington. Her life, spent wholly with her practical mother and an old man, had made her shy of confidences. For those who could read between the lines, her introspection and loneliness of heart were all told in *Child of the Soil*.

Every book that is written reveals its author. This is more true of a first novel than any other accomplished work, even an autobiography, for the latter is a determined effort at such a revelation, but the former is unconscious.

Alison packed her novel carefully, but without the

cautions recommended by Mr. Chase, and sent it off to Hemmerd and Co. Her mother and Mrs. Cuff stood at the front door when she started for the post office, the packet under her arm, shrilly wishing it luck. Rosamond waved from an upper window. Uncle Jonah slipped off one of his old shoes and sent it flying after her. Unfortunately his aim was as good as his intention, for it hit her rather too smartly in the back, but uncle Jonah was very pleased with himself.

"I wish we'd got a pound o' rice," he said.

It was not such a foolish remark, after all, for the publication of a book is not unlike matrimony in the extreme uncertainty as to how it will turn out.

Alison laughed, signalled to Rosamond and was not even annoyed by the shoe, but she could feel no interest or excitement in starting her first novel upon its travels. She did not care whether it failed or succeeded, whether Hemmerd scorned or praised it. She was still numbed and bewildered by the silence of her lover, but her first surprise was hourly growing into acute pain.

Those who laugh at Alison, or think that these words are an absurd exaggeration of an inexperienced girl's passing emotions, have forgotten, or never known, the loss of first love.

* * * * *

Barrington Chase was far from happy, as his mother and sisters had very good cause to know.

He was like the sun in the house, and they were all affected by his moods like obedient little thermometers. The weather in the Chase mansion, since the eventful afternoon at the *Arrow* office, had been thunderous and threatening.

Although Barrington still clung to the belief that it was only his impulsive pity which had led to—he hardly knew what to call it—the passionate scene without words, he knew that Alison had mistaken him.

To say that many a girl would have valued his kisses for what they were worth was not flattering to his vanity, or the kind of girl he was inclined to favour. Alison was so different. There was the trouble and the compliment of the whole affair.

Perhaps she considered herself tacitly engaged to him. Ten years ago he would have thrilled to the thought, but Barrington had reached the dangerous age of ease that is numbered five-and-forty, although he looked and declared that he felt much younger.

His home was very comfortable.

Alison was adorably gentle, but—she was a clever woman. He thought of some of her short stories and certain chapters in her first novel. Oh, yes, she was an alarmingly clever woman.

The possibilities of marriage with an alarmingly clever woman, who was still so very young, took possession of his mind.

The brains of the girl would have been one of her lesser assets, if he could be certain of her attitude towards himself never changing, for he was a man who could appreciate brains. But the caprice of women—some foolish people called it intuition—was a terrible menace to adoration of their husbands.

Alison had been loyal for a long time; he would have loved to reward her constancy, for it showed her worthiness. She had expected so little as a friend, but what of the demands for confidence in a betrothed?

The two broken engagements of his earlier years loomed in the distance as he looked behind. It was true she need never know, but he thought of her probable intimacy with his sisters, and his mother's garrulous pride in discussing all his affairs. They would be sure to chatter. Women again!

It seemed as inevitable, as it would be sad, that Alison's beautiful and touching faith in his perfection would be smirched by contact with a scandal-mongering world.

Again, his home was so very comfortable. If only one could assure a wife's slipping into her place, like a new piece of furniture or a pretty ornament, and never expecting to get out of it.

Literary women were notoriously restless and ambitious. He had known so many of them. They were impatient of instruction. Even that good little soul, Mrs. Tuck, seemed to get upon her husband's nerves, and she was a devoted wife too. One minute he inwardly raged at Mrs. Tuck for her interruption of the scene at the office, the next he cursed her for her tactless lingering.

Mrs. Chase and his sisters were not at all literary women, but they had great respect for his calling. Their minds could not shoot beyond the *Arrow*, but he knew that a time must come when Alison would lose her veneration for that estimable little sheet.

He was horribly sensitive to criticism, and that faculty once aroused in a girl of her talent might be severe. Disagreements, differences of opinion, arguments, quarrels!

Barrington foresaw them all with exaggerated clearness, but when he had worked himself into a state of indignation over Alison's (supposed) temper and obstinacy, his memory suddenly revived the sensation of holding her in his arms, reading the worship in her eyes and on her lips.

So the dilettante in love, the poor philanderer, passed through his bad hour.

* * * * *

Alison wrote her paragraphs for the *Daily Wire* and finished her three columns of Green Room Gossip.

"Are you going to take your 'copy' to the *Arrow* office to-day, dearie, or send it by post?" asked Mrs. Booker.

It was the question the girl had asked herself again and again. Bluntly spoken, she was obliged to give a definite reply.

There was a minute's pause.

"I'm going to send it by post, Mother."

"Then you don't want to see Mr. Chase this week, Ally?"

Another pause.

"No, Mother."

Alison went out of the room. She would have been surprised to see Mrs. Booker look after her with a troubled expression, and frown over her work.

It is sad to lack sympathy; it is more sad to be indifferent to sympathy; it is saddest of all to need so much and yet shrink away from it.

If Mrs. Booker had but called her back, or she could have seen the expression in her mother's face, her barrier of reserve might have been broken down, and all the foolish, unhappy story told. But the minute passed, and Alison was still alone.

The paragraphs were not published in the "Every Night" column of the *Wire* for several days. "Every Night" was a column of witty or topical paragraphs to which she often contributed. It was signed "O," but there were many devils working for that vowel.

On the very day of the next issue of the *Arrow* there was a letter for Alison. A letter from the office. A letter from Barrington Chase.

She took it to her own room, locked the door, and held the unopened envelope in her hand for a while, looking at it, trembling, wondering, remembering.

The single sheet she opened was typewritten on office paper, signed with his name, and there was a newspaper clipping fastened to the top left hand corner. It was her latest paragraphs from the *Daily Wire*.

"Dear Miss Booker," ran the note, "I was greatly surprised to see the enclosed pars in this morning's *Wire*. They are obviously a repetition of a part of

your Green Room Gossip in the current *Arrow*. Mr. Strathern asks me to point out that he relies upon contributors supplying his paper with exclusive copy. Please do not let such an indiscretion occur again.

“Yours sincerely,

“BARRINGTON CHASE.”

That was all.

He had nothing more to say to her. He was greatly surprised, angry, and disappointed. Strathern had told him to write and Barrington had obeyed.

She folded the letter carefully and put it back into the envelope. Then she threw herself down upon her bed and covered her face with her hands.

It was over. No man who loved her, or had ever loved her, could have written that short, cold, business letter. Her first impression had been wrong. He was not angry, or disappointed, or surprised. He was simply indifferent—Strathern’s pen, no more.

The confused recollections of three years swept backwards and forwards in her brain, from the first time when she met him, to the last.

She felt intuitively, without attempting to give a reason, that he had always treated her cruelly and thoughtlessly. Yes! He was a man of middle age, who should have known the effect of his tentative love-making on a young, impressionable woman.

She suddenly pictured his face, like a staring mask of indignation, and heard his rich voice demanding: “What have I done?”

Alison sprang to her feet and began to pace the room. She was not enraged, but there was a change in her unhappiness. She had recovered from the shock of the letter, as one recovers from a blow, to find herself quivering with emotion, hurt indeed, but extraordinarily alive.

It was as if she had broken the bonds of a long imprisonment, but suffered too much to realise her freedom.

She pondered a reply to Barrington's letter for several days, struggling to overcome the desire to see him, if it were only for a rebuff or reproaches.

A short letter, dispatched at last, saddened him, but strengthened his determination to end their friendship. Its humble tone about the paragraphs gave him a wretched half hour, recalling her gentleness and docility, but the way she ignored the memorable scene wounded his conceit and pride. He had set the example, it is true, but he considered Alison heartless to follow it.

A chance meeting with Strathern, in Fleet Street, added to the cruelty of Barrington's letter by showing her that it was partly false.

She was sheltering in a doorway, from a sudden squall, when the popular journalist took cover for a few minutes in the same place. He knew her work on the *Arrow*, but cut her when they met. Most people say they forget names, but remember faces. Mr. Strathern cheerfully forgot both.

Alison made herself known to him and they shook hands. She briefly told him of her iniquity in sending paragraphs concerning an *Arrow* interviewee to the *Daily Wire*, repeating Barrington's words:—"Mr. Strathern asks me to point out that he relies upon contributors supplying his paper with exclusive copy." She hoped Mr. Strathern was listening, but his gaze soon wandered from her face to the rain-swept street that looked as if it were gleaming and spattered with the fall of endless pennies.

"I really think it's clearing up," said Mr. Strathern, hopefully, when she came to a full stop.

Alison thought it was raining harder than ever, but she murmured agreement with her editor.

"I haven't heard of the letter, Miss Booker," said Mr. Strathern; "Chase hasn't mentioned anything about the *Daily Wire* to me."

"Then he wrote on his own authority entirely, Mr. Strathern?"

"No doubt—it's really getting lighter overhead," he replied, looking up at the sky.

"He was extremely severe, Mr. Strathern," said Alison, gravely.

"Oh, I expect it was only his game. Good-bye! We shall have the sun out in a minute——" and he hurried away in the still falling rain.

So much for Barrington's strict truthfulness! So much for Alison's belief that he was only the pen of his editor.

She turned abruptly towards the *Arrow* office, filled with a sudden, fierce longing to face the man and repeat Strathern's words, but after a few paces her mood changed as quickly. She seemed to feel the oppression of Barrington's heavy presence, the cold discourtesy she had seen him show to others, dismissing them with a well punctuated, ponderous sentence and a twist of the swivel chair.

Two weeks passed away. The Green Room Gossip was written and published without the exchange of a word between the acting editor and his contributor.

If the patrons of the *Arrow* could have known the gloomy spirit in which their weekly Gossip was written by Miss Booker, and the proofs corrected by Mr. Chase, they would have found it depressing reading.

At the end of the third week another letter, with the name of the paper printed on the flap of the envelope, arrived at Courtley Gardens. It was the gift of the last postman of the day. Mrs. Booker, her daughter, uncle Jonah and Rosamond were sitting together in the parlour after supper.

Alison's impulse was to take the letter away and read it alone. She rose quickly from her chair, hesitated, and sat down again. It was a minute before she could steady her hand to open the envelope coolly. Her companions paid no heed. Rosamond was reading a verse of poetry aloud now and again from a book she had bought that day, while uncle Jonah

dozed in his fancy nightcap over the fire, and Mrs. Booker darned.

Alison read the letter once—twice—from the beginning to the end of all things:—"Faithfully yours, Barrington Chase." Then she folded her arms upon the table and laid her head down upon them.

"Ally!" exclaimed Mrs. Booker.

"My darling! What's the matter?" cried Rosamond Courtley.

It was a few minutes before Alison could reply. She was not crying, but too moved for words. Rosamond got hold of one of her hands, kissing and fondling it, but Mrs. Booker only repeated her name: "Ally! Ally!"

When Alison lifted her face she was very pale, but self-possessed.

"I have lost my work on the *Arrow*," she said; "This is a note from Mr. Chase. He tells me that—" she found the line and read it slowly:—

"'A grave view, I regret to say, has been taken of your tactical error of three weeks back, and I am directed to request you to discontinue the Green Room Gossip and Artist of the Week columns——' that's all."

Mrs. Booker forgot her usual calm in eager questions and regrets. The weekly cheque from the *Arrow* had been their stand-by for so long. Uncle Jonah sat immovable, staring blankly, inclined to think he had fallen into a terrible dream of lost jobs.

"You warned me, Mother, about the stupidity of sending those 'pars' to the *Daily Wire*," said Alison, bitterly; "But it doesn't matter. He would have found some other excuse to get rid of me."

"Do you mean Mr. Strathern, Ally?" asked her mother.

"No. It is nothing to do with him. It is Barrington Chase."

"Then why don't you appeal to Mr. Strathern?"

cried Mrs. Booker; "It's too bad to throw you over for such a trifle after years of hard work. Will they still take your short stories?"

"I don't think so. I shall not ask them, or speak to Mr. Strathern. Good-bye to the *Arrow*! But what shall I do instead? How can I ever earn the money——"

She rose from her chair in great agitation, threw her arms round Mrs. Booker's neck and pressed her cheek against her face.

"I shall have to begin the fight all over again. Oh, Mother, it seems so hard—I'm so sorry——"

"Don't be sorry, Alison!" exclaimed Rosamond Courtley; "You've worked too long for that little rag of a paper. The day will come when you'll thank your lucky stars it threw you over while you were still a new writer. Think of your novel! Hang their old Green Room Gossip! You'll do great things. I know you will, darling. I'm sure of it."

"Rosamond! Rosamond! If you only knew——" sighed Allison.

She felt as if all the joy of life were over, but as she looked into her friend's fond eyes her breaking heart—oh, incredible!—seemed to leap in her breast and the hope of youth rushed back.

CHAPTER VIII

A night at the Fraternity of St. Swithin. Rosamond, the Bookers, and Jerry. Wilbur Rathbone is sketched—but the reader, like Alison and others, will hear very little about him, either at the beginning or the end of the story.

“I’ve longed all my life to get hold of a dear little pub, and at last the dream has come true!” said Rosamond Courtley, closing her eyes and rocking backwards and forwards on her low stool by the wood fire, in a kind of comfortable ecstasy.

“All things come round to him who does not wait,” quoted a dark young man who sat next to her.

“Do you mean to say, Fra, that they also serve who do *not* stand and wait?” asked another man in the room.

“No, no! We can do what we like with commonplace proverbs, Fra, but if we alter a line of poetry it is unforgivable.”

“I’ve heard you misquote *me* very often,” observed the first.

“I said poetry, Fra—poetry, not accidental verse or nursery rhymes. But to return to Miss Courtley’s delight in her pub, I’m afraid our ideas on the subject will not agree with the views of the neighbourhood. What do you say, Mr. Rathbone?”

The speaker turned abruptly on the oldest man, and the stranger, of the little party. He was sitting in shadow, with his long legs stretched to the fire and his hands folded behind his head as he leaned lazily back.

"No doubt it will be a sad sight for many," he replied; "For although the transformation of the Grapes tavern into the workshops of the Fraternity of St. Swithin is highly commendable, from your point of view, there is one old gentleman at least who looks upon it as a fall indeed."

"What old gentleman, Mr. Rathbone?" asked Rosamond.

"I saw him as I came up to the house this evening. He seemed to be addressing a departed landlord, or the shade of a lost pot-boy. 'I'm glad you didn't live to see the day, Tom Plumley,' he said, 'You wouldn't have known your own place. Such a dear little public 'ouse as it was, old Plum!'"

"Such a horrid, dirty, dark little public house!" said Rosamond, indignantly; "Your old gentleman didn't express the general opinion. All the neighbours seem to be glad to welcome us. I've already made friends with the greengrocer, the cobbler opposite, and the rag-and-bone merchant at the corner."

The two young men who called each other Fra laughed, but a third, sitting on the ground cross-legged, shifted uneasily and his expression showed that he highly disapproved of Miss Courtley's friendship with rag-and-bone men.

He was a lanky boy with a quantity of light brown, wavy hair, delicate features and blue eyes—Jerry Cuff, four years older than when we saw him last—and was dressed with elaborate nonchalance, blue shirt, loosely knotted green tie, grey tweed suit, green socks, and wide-toed shoes.

"Do you hope to induce the neighbours to join your handicraft classes?" asked Rathbone; "What is the end and aim of the Fraternity of St. Swithin, and why have you placed yourselves under the patronage of that old weather-cock—if I may call him so without disrespect."

"We want to bring some of the old joy of simple

work back to the people," said Rosamond slowly; "The present conditions of life, especially in a big city, are so ugly, so exhausting, so dull and wearisome. We believe that the only possible hope for society is in substituting man's effort for machinery, which means the return to the labourer of his lost pride and healthy pleasure in his labour."

"See handbills," said the young man beside her, passing Rathbone a printed sheet from a pile he had been folding and slipping into envelopes.

"We chose the name of St. Swithin because he is famous for his love of the free open air, the winds and rains of heaven," said the other brother of the Fraternity; "Do you know that he wished to be buried out of doors, instead of in his cathedral, so that the traveller might walk over his grave and the sun and moon shine upon it?"

"That little eccentricity—what does it matter where one is buried?—never interested me so much as the fact that he knew our English Alfred," replied Rathbone.

"Then he must have lived an awfully long time ago," put in Jerry, who had never liked to confess that he was entirely ignorant of the life of the saint in question, or any other.

"He lived in the ninth century," said Rathbone; "And he is supposed to have been the tutor of King Ethelwulf of Wessex, who was father of Alfred the Great. We know very little about him, except that he became Bishop of Winchester—I speak under correction of the Fraternity."

"I believe you're right," said Rosamond; "When I have time I mean to search at the British Museum for legends of St. Swithin, if there are any to be found, in the Venerable Bede, you know, and other old writers."

"I'm afraid you must leave out the Venerable Bede," said Rathbone; "He was inconsiderate

enough to die about a hundred and fifty years before Swithin was born."

"You ought to become one of us, Mr. Rathbone. You could give lectures on the Saints," said Rosamond, with a laugh.

"I'm afraid I know more about the sinners," he replied.

"But you're going to help us by writing a nice article in the *Daily Wire*, are you not?" asked Rosamond, bending towards him with one of her prettiest smiles.

"I'll do my best," he said, putting the handbill in his note-book; "You mustn't be disappointed if it isn't very long. No doubt the public would appreciate a couple of columns, and I should enjoy writing them, but my editor is a demon with the blue pencil."

"Don't be sarcastic with us. As if we should expect two columns!" cried Rosamond.

"I wish we could do without advertisement of any kind," said one of the Brothers; "It's very good of you to look us up, Mr. Rathbone, but I hate this modern booming and interviewing in the Press. There was a terrible little woman here last week, from the Sparrow, who asked me whether we were going to do our own laundry and if Miss Courtley knew how to scrub. Tuck, that was the creature's name. Mrs. Tuck of the *Weekly Sparrow*."

"*Arrow*, Fra, not *Sparrow*," put in Jerry, irritably; "It's a capital little paper. We know a young lady who used to write for it, don't we, Miss Courtley? I tell you, it's a fine 'ad' to be noticed well in the *Arrow*."

"Very fine!" rejoined the other, scornfully; "I bought a copy out of curiosity. There was one interview with a duke's butler and another with a Bond Street beauty specialist."

"Oh, the little *Arrow* has gone to the devil since Strathern sold it," observed Rathbone; "It belongs

to the Buckley people now, and they manage to spoil everything."

"It was Miss Alison Booker of whom Jerry spoke just now," said Rosamond; "Do you know her? She wrote all the theatrical gossip and interviewed artists for the *Arrow* years ago. I believe she used to send paragraphs to your paper at the time."

"I read her first book—what's it called?—'London Cries,' but I never met her."

"That is her second book, Mr. Rathbone. The first was 'Child of the Soil,' but it didn't succeed very well."

"She writes cleverly, but I wish she hadn't steeped herself in Thackeray and Dickens."

"I don't care about Dickensian humour at second hand, and when people try to imitate Thackeray they only contract his habit of prosing," said the gloomy Fra.

"You are rather severe," said Rosamond, drily; "Miss Booker's novel was splendidly reviewed, and everybody seems to like it immensely."

"Forgive me!" exclaimed Rathbone, with a sudden gentleness of voice as he saw Rosamond's admiration of her absent friend; "I think so highly of Miss Booker's work that I look forward to the time when she will be able to give her originality full play."

"Modern fiction appeals to me no more than the modern Press," observed the gloomy Brother.

"What do you suggest to improve them both?" asked Rathbone, gravely.

"I wouldn't attempt to improve them. I would get rid of them."

"Oh, come, come! Are there to be no more ale and cakes because thou art virtuous?" asked Rathbone.

He rose from his low seat, looking in the fitful light of the fire like a man of super-human height, amaz-

ingly thin, with a face still young and eager in expression, but calm and experienced too; level eyes, not too large, but clear and deep; a firm mouth and chin, clean-shaven; a straight nose; dark, closely cut hair; well knit limbs, but with a certain languor in movement and gesture, as one often sees in big men, frequently contrasting, as in his case, with mental alertness and energy of character. Such was the outward seeming of Wilbur Rathbone, at the age of seven and forty.

Rosamond and Jerry took him to the door. It opened on a mean street in Shepherd's Bush. The small shops on either side were still open, although it was past nine o'clock at night, and people bustling or lounging past. A boy with a mouth-organ was playing a different tune from a wheezy old gramophone, hoarse and cracked with age and bad weather, on a barrow at the end of the street.

"We shall leave the old sign of the Grapes hanging over our new board," said Rosamond, glancing up at the two, the former representing a big bunch of the fruit of the vine, purple and white on the same stem; the latter, a clearly printed scroll, "Fraternity of St. Swithin," with a picture of the saint standing in a rain-storm.

"Good luck to your looms and skill to your craftsmen!" said Rathbone.

"Come to see us again," said Rosamond; "We never work on Saturday nights, but idle away a few hours with our friends."

"Thanks. I'll not forget. Good-night."

He smiled to himself, a kindly, tolerant smile, as he walked away. They were all so earnest and so inexperienced at the Fraternity. He liked them very much and believed in their gospel. It was not so new to him as Rosamond Courtley imagined, but Wilbur did not talk about himself, and she had instructed him on subjects he had pondered and puzzled over years before she left the country to reform London.

He glanced back at the light in the window of the Fraternity with genuine admiration.

"Good boys," he thought; "Good boys, true and steady, and a beautiful woman to inspire them. 'So shines a good deed in a naughty world!'"

The adjective in the quotation was not appropriate. The narrow street was a dreary world, a sordid, melancholy world, with little of naughtiness, but much of dirt, to be found in it. He caught the words from the gramophone in passing the barrow—the shrill voice of a music hall star, metallic and rasping from a worn-out record:—

"Don'tcher be ridickylous,
Don'tcher come and tickle us,
Go and tickle someone else,
Don'tcher tickle me—ow! ow! ow!"

Rathbone turned away contemptuously, but glancing at the pale, haggard proprietor of the barrow, who owned the machine, he relented and added a sixpence to the lonely halfpenny in the man's torn old cap.

* * * * *

As the door of the Fraternity closed upon Rosamond and Jerry Cuff, after Rathbone's departure, they were alone for a minute in the dark passage.

He seized her hand and kissed it, with none of the diffidence and shyness of the Jerry Cuff of their first friendship in Courtley Gardens.

The past four years had made far more difference in Jerry than in Rosamond. Seventeen to twenty-one is a much more changeful period of life than twenty-six to thirty. At the former age it is all restless growth; at the latter it is leisurely, slight development—a time of pause.

Jerry had not been entirely constant to his first love, but he returned to her at intervals, entranced once more, and more kindly received after absence. When Alison remonstrated with her friend, for play-

ing with the boy, Rosamond retorted that it was better for him to be in love with her than devoting himself "to some vain woman who would make a fool of him." If she made a fool of him herself it was prettily done and he did not guess it.

Rosamond pulled away her hand abstractedly and showed no inclination to linger.

Fra John and Fra Lionel, known to the commonplace world beyond St. Swithin's as Mr. John Hooper and Mr. Lionel Ford, were washing up the coffee cups and tidying the room before they departed. Miss Courtley lived in the house.

"What news of the Slade, Jerry?" asked Rosamond, leaning one hand on the mantelpiece and holding her green frock away from her sandled foot with the other. Jerry's face clouded. He was taking his art education ill.

"Oh, there's no news there, Miss Courtley," he said; "It's the same grind day after day. I'm sick of the place."

"Can't imagine why you ever went there," observed Lionel Ford, who was the gloomy young man; "If a man has any originality it would be taken out of him. All the Art schools in London are mausoleums for English artists."

"Well, I had to learn to draw somewhere," said Jerry, crossly; "It was Mr. George Chichester who advised me to try the Slade and he ought to know."

"George Chichester—an A.R.A.!" exclaimed Fra Lionel, scornfully.

"Well, he's got to be an Associate before he reaches the top of the tree," said Jerry, misunderstanding the other's tone; "He'll be a Royal Academician some day. He's been awfully decent to me, but he don't seem to think much of my work."

"I should take that as a compliment," said Ford.

"Oh, would you? It's very jolly, when you've finished a picture ready for framing, to be told to work away and you'll get it into shape in time.

That's what he said about my 'Fair Rosamond,' and when I explained that it was done, he seemed to think I'd make a joke."

John Hooper laughed, but Lionel muttered, "Serve you right!"

As the coffee cups were washed and the room tidy, the two young men put on their overcoats and bade their hostess good night. Jerry ventured to stop a little longer.

"I suppose both those fellows have got a lot of money?" he said, looking after them with envious eyes.

"What makes you think so?" Rosamond asked, coolly.

"Well, they can afford to come here five nights a week and give lessons for nothing. They're not really craftsmen, are they?"

"Indeed they are. Lionel Ford is a skilled carpenter and John Hooper is a fine metal-worker."

"But they don't earn their living at their trade, do they?"

"John does, but Lionel has a little money of his own—a bare subsistence, that's all."

"What on earth can make them come here?" cried Jerry.

"Why do you come here yourself?" asked Rosamond, smiling at his bluntness.

"That's different," replied Jerry, turning red; "I come to see you. But those two chaps are so keen on their classes, and St. Swithin, and doing strong, good hand-work, and getting rid of capital and factories, and all that sort of rot they're always jawing about."

"I think you're very ignorant, Jerry, and very stupid," said Rosamond, laughing outright; "Can't you understand that men like John and Lionel, and women like Mrs. Grain, Lucy Stacey and myself, don't measure all things in life by their money value? You needn't interrupt me to say you hadn't men-

tioned money——” she went on, holding up her finger—“Because you would turn the talk in that direction sooner or later. You always do. I did hope when you went to the Slade, and made friends with Mr. Chichester, that you would look upon your own work as we look upon ours.”

“What? Art for Art’s sake, that sort o’ thing?” asked Jerry, desperately.

“No, art for the sake of beauty and everyday life. I thought you would take an interest in our Fraternity and help us to make one little street, in this city of terrible streets, brighter and happier.”

“Good Lord! I’ll do anything I can to please you, Rosamond!” cried Jerry; “But it’s no good rushing out of the house and offering to give rag-and-bone men and your other neighbours drawing lessons, is it?”

“No good at all,” said Rosamond, taking his outburst very calmly; “People must have decent houses, good clothes, clean food and strong boots before they can take drawing lessons. I don’t want your practical help, but your sympathy. Look at Alison Booker! She doesn’t work with us, but she believes in us and enters into the spirit of the place.”

“So she may,” grumbled Jerry, going off at a tangent; “But she’s often told me I’m wasting Mum’s money at the Slade, for they’ll only turn me from a fairly good caricaturist into a very poor artist. And she told me not to bother about your Fraternity, because it isn’t in my line. Well, there you are!”

“You’re a silly boy, Jerry!” exclaimed Rosamond, looking down into his shallow, blue eyes as he stooped forward in his chair with face upturned; “I can’t agree with Alison that the Fraternity is not in your line, but you must settle that question for yourself. If you don’t want to come any more, you needn’t. I think that Mr. Rathbone will come again.”

“Long-legged, weedy chap, isn’t he?” said Jerry,

who made a point of disparaging, as far as he dared, every new man whom he met at St. Swithin's.

"Have you seen George Chichester lately?" asked Rosamond, turning her face from Jerry to look thoughtfully into the ashy wood fire.

"He was round at the Slade the other day with old Brown—old Brown's our head, you know—but I didn't speak to him. The man who works next to me said he doesn't come to town nearly so often as he did before his wife died. By the way, may I bring him here one evening? He's an ass, but you'll like him."

"Do you mean Mr. Chichester, Jerry?" asked Rosamond.

"Not much! I mean the man who works next to me in the Life. He's named Porker."

"What an objectional name, Jerry."

"Rather! We call him Bacon, or Piggy. Would you like to meet him?"

"Yes, if you like, any Saturday between seven and—what's the time now?"

"I say! It's twenty past eleven," said Jerry, looking at his watch.

"Then it's twenty minutes past my hour for saying good-night," exclaimed Rosamond; "You must really go now. I want to lock up."

Jerry reluctantly pulled on his overcoat and fumbled over lighting a cigarette. He had become suddenly nervous. Rosamond, having dismissed him, was again looking thoughtfully into the fire. He smoked for a few seconds, then pinched the light out of the cigarette with the old habit of economy, reminiscent of his never-mentioned days as a street artist.

"Look here! I say, Rosamond!" he blurted out.

"Yes, what is it?" she asked, without interest.

"You know! I can't bear leaving you like this, without a word, or even a glance. Rosamond! You haven't said good-bye to me for months in the old way. I can't stand it any longer. I do love you so horribly!"

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"Now, Jerry, if you begin to talk such nonsense—as if you could love me horribly!—I won't let you come again."

"But I do! I do! I'd die for your sake," he cried, wildly.

"As for bidding you good-bye in the old way," she went on, ignoring his last words; "I told you it was the last time on your birthday—or my birthday—I've forgotten the particular day. Now, it's no use getting excited, Jerry dear."

"If you would kiss me once, Rosamond, only once——"

"No, not once. I like you very well, but I don't love you at all. Understand that. It's ridiculous. You're only twenty-one and I'm nearly thirty. I'm quite old enough to be——" she was going to say your mother, but checked herself and ended rather tamely—"your great-aunt."

"I could make you treat me differently if I chose," said Jerry, taking a step towards her, with his weak, refined face set in a scowl.

"Oh, no, you couldn't. Don't be theatrical, Jerry. You're not a bit like the villain of melodrama. Villains who treat women as they choose are always dark and sardonic, but you're as fair and pretty and sentimental as a girl."

His face flushed. Her flippant little speech had the effect she desired.

"Good-night!" he said, roughly, and strode down the dark passage to the front door.

She heard him open it, there was a long pause, then it closed very noisily, and he was gone.

CHAPTER IX

Rathbone asks a few questions about Alison Booker. The girls together. Chichester and his wife. How Jerry Cuff fled from the Fraternity.

WILBUR RATHBONE was one of the assistant editors of the *Daily Wire*.

He had gone to St. Swithin's, in Shepherd's Bush, not at all as a duty, but simply out of curiosity. It would have been much easier for him to have asked one of his reporters to let him have five hundred words on the very small Fraternity. But he had heard of Rosamond Courtley and her companions from his old friend, Chichester, and was glad enough to spend a couple of hours on his one free night of the week, Saturday, in seeking her out.

Mrs. Grain and Miss Stacey had been absent, but Rosamond was a host, hostess and company in herself.

Rathbone was greatly attracted by her vivid personality. He observed her almost as closely as Alison Booker had done on the memorable day, four years past, when she first appeared in Courtley Gardens. He marked and admired her gallant poise; rich colouring, as if the sun had left some of its sparkle in hair and eyes; the delicate suggestion of her favourite scent, mignonette; and, above all else, the happy good fellowship of her voice and manners.

He saw the adoration in the blue eyes of the silent boy, Jerry Cuff, and was a little surprised at the

impersonal friendliness of the genial young Fra John and gloomy young Fra Lionel.

It is true that Rathbone's own admiration was quite impersonal, but he considered himself a middle-aged man, and very soon lost his first, merely pleasurable impression of Rosamond in thinking over her schemes, comparing them with others he had known.

Experience had taught him to disbelieve in the possibility of modern society returning to hand-work, the old guild system, or the simplicity of life which was advocated and followed by the lady of St. Swithin's. He welcomed, nevertheless, a little green spot in the wilderness of London streets.

He looked forward to meeting Alison Booker and hearing her opinion of the Fraternity. She was evidently a great friend of Miss Courtley, and, having read her novel and articles she had contributed to the *Daily Wire*, he believed she would be amusing and original on the subject.

He spoke, on the following evening, to one of his colleagues who generally saw Alison when she called at the office.

"Miss Booker? Let me see!" said the man; "Oh, yes, I know her. Not at all the kind of girl to cry, or make a scene, when one fires back her best stuff. A quiet, self-possessed young party."

"No modern girl cries at a rebuff, does she?" asked Rathbone; "It is as much out of fashion as fainting."

"My dear Rath, do you imagine women have left off crying because they don't do it in public quite so often? There was a typist in my room when I was over the way——" he jerked his thumb towards the window to signify the office of a rival paper—"who was always weeping, and she was a capital little worker too. The carpet was damp the whole time I had her."

"What a depressing girl," said Rathbone.

"Not at all. Crying in a woman is like bad language in a man, nothing when you're used to it."

"I wish women didn't have to fight their own battles in the world, Oliver," said Rathbone; "I believe many of them are far more hurt than we imagine."

"They wouldn't thank you for your sympathy," rejoined his friend, drily; "They don't want man's sympathy and protection in these days. I agree with them in that, but if they are going to have equal opportunities and privileges they must put up with equal hardships and responsibilities."

"The hardships and responsibilities of a newspaper office, for instance," said Rathbone, laughing at his companion, who was lounging in an easy chair, smoking.

Henry Oliver was one of the laziest men he knew to be a successful journalist. For years he had been "O." of the *Daily Wire*, for whom Alison Booker had written paragraphs in the old days. It was he who had accepted and printed the fatal "pars" which gave Barrington Chase an opportunity to get rid of her work on the *Arrow*.

"To return to little Alison Booker," said Oliver; "You'll like her, Rath. I should think she was your kind of girl—plenty of nous, but with no conceit about her. She reminds one of a cook's ideal of a butler—proud, y'know, but pleasant."

"Well, introduce me, the next time she calls in, Oliver."

"All right. I'll pass her on. She doesn't come very often or stay long. She's a tactful little person, I'll say that for her."

At the time when this talk was going on, Alison Booker, on the other side of London, happened to be listening to a description of Wilbur Rathbone's visit to St. Swithin's.

Rosamond's effusive nature made her exaggerate as naturally as she talked. So she said Mr. Rathbone had been enthralled by the idea of the Fraternity, delighted with John Hooper and Lionel Ford, simply

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frantic over the big new loom and spinning wheels. Alison hinted that his short notice in the *Daily Wire* had been very mild, considering his reported enthusiasm.

They were sitting in Rosamond's old room in Courtley Gardens. It had been turned into a study for Alison. The Bookers, while they still had lodgers on the ground floor, were now able to afford to keep the top of the house for themselves.

The little room, overlooking the crowded roofs, yards, and line of poplars, had lost all the bright colours and quaint medley of pretty possessions of Rosamond's day, for Alison had grown tidy—by force of will—and favoured severity in her surroundings. The only beauty to be seen was a glass vase filled with flowers. There were two pictures on the wall, the first being a rough sketch of her mother by Jerry Cuff, which she had snatched from under his hands before he had had time to finish it out of all recognition; and the second a delicate water colour of George Chichester's orchard at Esher, as she had seen it first, golden with daffodils and pearly with fruit blossoms. The artist had painted it for her.

Alison had changed but slightly in four years. She had lost her way of blushing quickly, and gave the impression that Oliver had voiced to Wilbur Rathbone of being "a quiet, self-possessed young party." She had grown a little hard, but it was to defend herself from the buffets of life.

If Barrington Chase had met her first when she was eight-and-twenty, he would have known a very different being from "little Miss Booker" of the *Arrow* days. His instructions in trifles, and the effect of his revolving chair, would have left her indifferent. Her shyness had been left behind with her interviewing. All his pomposity would have failed to impress her.

"Jerry Cuff doesn't improve with age," said Rosamond, when she had exhausted the subject of the

Daily Wire and its editor; "He's just as fond of money and indifferent to good work as on the first day he went to the Slade."

"I'm afraid he'll disappoint his parents," said Alison; "Mrs. Cuff told me, only the last time she came to see us, that she supposed he'd have to live in London to make his fortune. She said people were well supplied with pictures in your little town, Rosamond. There are no openings at all for artists."

Mr. and Mrs. Cuff had gone to live in the place where Rosamond's father was curate.

"My dear Alison, there isn't a good picture in the place, except at our house," replied her friend; "If Jerry becomes a portrait painter we might get him a commission to do the Mayor, or the local J.P. and his family."

"Jerry will never be a portrait painter," said Alison, shaking her head; "Are there any tavern signs in the neighbourhood that want re-colouring?"

"You're a little hard on the poor fellow, Alison."

"Not at all. He might begin with the Fighting Cocks, or the Green Lion, or the Red Cow, and work up to the Mayor and J.P. by degrees."

"By the time he leaves the Slade I hope he will be a very different boy," said Rosamond, thoughtfully.

"You know my opinion of the Slade for Jerry," said Alison; "He is simply wasting time and money. He would have done just as well if he'd studied after the fashion of an American lady whom I met at Mrs. Tuck's the other day. She told me she had 'taken Art' twice when she was a girl, but was not encouraged by the results to go on with it."

"Do you mean she had had only two lessons?" cried Rosamond.

"I suppose so. That is what she said, and she asked me whether I had 'taken literature at school.' I was obliged to say no."

"However do you manage to write so well!" ex-

claimed Rosamond, quickly adding: "I mean, darling, you didn't have many advantages in education, did you?"

"None at all," said Alison, calmly; "But I have read a great many novels and I have a good memory."

"Well?" questioned Rosamond.

"Well, if one 'prigs' judiciously from widely different sources only the very experienced reader will find one out."

"Everybody says you're so original," said Rosamond, laughing.

"If I am, it must be all evolved from inner consciousness, for my 'wide and sympathetic knowledge of humanity'—see Press—is entirely confined to the study of our neighbours and specializing in uncle Jonah, the oldest inhabitant of Courtley Gardens."

"Alison dear! You speak as if you never walked out of the street."

"Figuratively speaking, I don't. Literally, of course I do. I have no interests, or objects in life, beyond it."

"Darling!" protested her friend.

"It's true, darling."

"But how narrow and sad to be indifferent to all one's fellow creatures, in their joys and sorrows."

"Don't take me so seriously, Rosamond. I'm not indifferent to you and the Fraternity of St. Swithin—but I can hear Mother clattering the cups. Whatever else in the world passes away, uncle Jonah's tea-time is fixed and eternal."

"Uncle Jonah isn't the only person in the house who drinks tea," Rosamond mildly observed, as they went downstairs.

"Right as you always are," returned Alison; "But other people can enjoy a cup at different hours. Uncle Jonah's tea-time, like Julius Cæsar's character, is constant as the northern star."

She spoke carelessly enough and began to help her mother with her usual good temper, but Rosamond's

ear, so sensitive to the tones of a voice she loved, heard the discordant note of bitterness in the merry music of her laugh.

Mrs. Booker, practical, kind, her hair still dragged into a tight knot, and her skirts as brief as it was possible to make them, had been visiting a neighbour who was ill, the word "visiting" to be defined as cleaning, cooking, dressing the patient, helping to mind the patient's shop and her three children.

Four years had passed stormily over uncle Jonah's head judging by his appearance, for he was more shrunk and hooped than ever, but chirruped briskly in the Summertime, like an old London sparrow, and lived in the glow of the fire in the Winter, like an old salamander.

The night-caps which Rosamond had made him had fallen into disuse, like the top hat of an earlier day, his latest fancy being a kind of wig of rough brown wool, knitted by Mrs. Booker under his directions. Uncle Jonah believed that his friends would mistake this peculiar head-covering for a crop of hair.

When tea was over, and Rosamond had gone away, Alison returned to her own little room at the top of the house. She told her mother she wanted to write, but, after easing her conscience by arranging her desk for work, she pulled a chair to the window and sat down, looking idly out.

There was no amusement or interest to be found in the darkening houses and empty yards. Brown Autumn had passed the poplars by, for they were still green and leafy in the late September evening.

Alison was thinking of her new book.

How long it seemed since she sent "Child of the Soil" to the dreaded firm of Hemmerd! Its fate had reversed the precedent of many a famous first novel. Accepted in three weeks, and published within six months, the result had sadly disappointed both Mr. Hemmerd's reader and the great Hemmerd himself. Many publishers have refused a very good

novel and lived to regret it. He had accepted a fairly good one and very soon regretted it.

"Child of the Soil" was well reviewed, but "dead" in no time, having earned the sum of twenty-six pounds, fourteen shillings and tenpence for its anxious author.

Messrs. Hemmerd were sorry they could not see their way to producing Miss Booker's next novel, and Miss Booker sent "London Cries" to another firm. Messrs. Merrickson brought it out, arranged to publish her next three works of fiction, and Mr. Hemmard considered himself—until he forgot all about it—a very ill-used man. Having refused Alison's second little effort he thought it was very bad taste in her to make a big success with it.

"London Cries" was still going well, but Alison had ceased to care for it. She resembled a primitive woman with her children in her feelings for the creations of her brain. The last was always the dearest; once out in the world, making its own way, her love was over. Indeed, the longer her brain children lived, the more clearly she saw their faults and wished she had formed them better—even when they dutifully sent her regular cheques and made their appearance in new editions.

The latest story absorbed all her thoughts; the characters seemed to gather round her in the spreading darkness. The shock of her loss of Barrington Chase had strangely affected her work. It had killed the never very strong talent for journalism she might, in different circumstances, have developed to its greatest capacity. She still wrote occasionally for the *Daily Wire*, but the first energy of youth, coupled with the alertness of mind to foresee sensations and seize upon events of the minute—indispensable to a good journalist—had gone.

She purposely avoided that part of London where there was a probability of meeting Barrington. If it had not been for the friendship which Mrs. Tuck

forced upon her, she would have been as ignorant of the falling fortunes of the *Arrow* as any casual reader. Mrs. Tuck told her of the sale of the paper to the greedy firm of Buckley's, noted for a Gargantuan mouth to devour small weeklies.

Mr. Strathern did not exactly sell Barrington with the paper, but it was understood that he should be conveyed to the new office, in Buckley Buildings, E.C., with other useful pieces of furniture. Unfortunately he proved too heavy for his post, for the new proprietors of the *Arrow* altered its style and hustled poor Barrington out of his set ways.

He had willingly shown subservience to an old hand like Strathern, but he could not bring himself to take instructions from a chief who was many years his junior and with no idea of editorial dignity.

Mr. Chase was not accustomed to having his wordy suggestions accepted with a cheery "Right-oh!" or rejected with a careless: "Oh, I say, chuck it, old boy!"

He left the *Arrow* before it had lost all individuality in the Buckley machine. His next appointment was with a long established firm of publishers who specialized in scholastic works. It was dull, but admirably suited to his personality, and it was not long before he referred to his life at the *Arrow* office as "the dear old days," vaguely hinting that his colleagues of the past, including the model Mrs. Tuck and gentle little Alison Booker, were a wild, racketsy, Bohemian set.

Alison rarely thought of Barrington, never when planning the chapters of a new book. She had not fallen in love since their parting. Her growing success satisfied the innate longing for adventure in her heart; she had yet to discover her own limitations; it was possible—it was really possible—she might become a great novelist. Fame and power came into her dreams, with wealth as a little heeded complement.

Her work had gained in style and humour since the end of the first chapter of her own love story. She was writing from an impersonal standpoint, unspoilt by having cared so much for a man unworthy of her devotion.

She smiled at the recollection of Barrington, but never belittled his effect upon her character, for it had changed her from a sentimental girl into a self-contained woman.

Another strong influence of her life had been her friendship with George Chichester. Alison was capable of friendship with men, as different from mere acquaintanceship as it was from passion.

Even Chichester's wife had felt no jealousy of "little Booker." Chichester had fallen in love with a young person named Bertha Smith when he was an art student of twenty-one, in very much the same way Alison had fallen in love with Barrington Chase—for no reason at all—and she had promptly made him her husband. His old friend, Wilbur Rathbone, had called her an agreeable young person, and the description exactly suited her.

Chichester had not disappointed Bertha Smith. She had foreseen his success and rejoiced in it. They got on very well together, for he was a kind, absent-minded, affectionate man, more absorbed in his work than in anything else, and she was an excellent house-keeper. If he had not called her "Bertha," or the matrimonial "My dear," a stranger would have thought the artist was talking to a lady he had recently met—say at a party or a picnic—whom it was necessary to entertain with occasional common-places.

They had two children, cherry-cheeked, curly-headed little girls, who seemed to be regarded by their father as charming little models that a kindly Providence had quartered upon his house to be put into pictures. They were inseparable and so much alike that a lady, going to call upon their mother and

meeting the children in the garden, exclaimed in admiration:—

“You perfect twins! Of course you *are* twins, are you not?”

“Yes,” said one of the little perfections, too polite to contradict; “She is four and I am five and a half.”

Thereafter they were known as the twins.

Alison Booker paid occasional visits to the Chichesters’ house, at Esher, during the last two years of Mrs. Chichester’s life. Many a happy hour she spent in the garden with Tiny and Tot—the twins—and many a minute of pure delight in their father’s studio. Chichester had forgotten that they had ever met, and considerably embarrassed each other, as interviewer and victim.

Their talk was chiefly about his pictures, rarely of her books, for she was painfully diffident and ill at ease when he tried to discuss her work. It made her self-conscious, feeling the poverty of her achievement in the rich promise of his continual effort.

Mrs. Chichester and tea appeared together. Alison was secretly surprised at the artist’s patient acceptance, day after day, year after year, of his wife’s silly and superfluous adjectives:—“Oh, how sweet, George!” “Perfectly charming, George!” “Exquisite, George!”—as she glanced at his pictures for less than a minute.

Mrs. Chichester was one of the last women one would have expected to die suddenly. She had often mentioned her fine health, believing, as so many people do, that absence of noticeable illness and daily pain is good enough for boasting. Even when it was discovered she was suffering from a malignant disease, long regarded by herself as a mere trifle, she talked about having an operation as if her cure would be certain and permanent because it was going to be performed by an expensive specialist.

The operation was pronounced to be successful. The skill of the surgeon and the care of trained nurses

were equally to be commended. There was only one disturbing element about the case—the patient died.

Chichester was sincerely grieved. All the dull years of his marriage seemed to slip away when he looked upon his wife's face after her death. He thought of her once more as the unknown girl he had met in his boyhood, and loved so well.

He missed her cheerful bustling about the house, flood of talk he had grown to heed so little, officious advice he had generally ignored, and little irritating ways he had schooled himself not to observe.

A good housekeeper was engaged to take care of the children, and, after a few months, the artist had grown accustomed to his life alone. He was fond of them, but he never realized his own importance in their eyes. They were shy, sensitive little creatures, as unlike their mother in character as they were like her in appearance.

The twins were trained, not to fear their father, but to keep out of his way. The good housekeeper was unconsciously jealous of his influence, and taught Tiny and Tot to regard themselves as his models, when he wanted them, but not to approach the studio unasked. They must never worry him. They must never tell him their troubles or expect him to care for their society.

He was an artist, and an artist, according to the housekeeper, did not hurt little girls, but never wanted to make friends with them—not an ogre at present, but liable to turn into one at a minute's notice.

Chichester had had no brothers or sisters himself and knew little of children. He saw that Tiny and Tot were healthy and well clothed; he heard them laughing and chattering together; he thought they did not care about him and admitted, with a sigh, that it was natural enough, for he was a grave, middle-aged man.

The death of Mrs. Chichester did not interfere with

his friendship with Alison Booker, although they met less frequently. Sometimes he found his way to Courtley Gardens; sometimes she spent an afternoon at Esher. He had tried hard, for her sake, to like and help Jerry Cuff.

Jerry was duly impressed with his pictures, more with his big studio. He listened gratefully to the older man's advice and laboriously read the books he heard Alison or the artist praise.

Every Saturday he went to the Fraternity in Shepherd's Bush, enslaved by Rosamond and hugging his chains. Alison was often there and one night—eventful night!—Jerry found both Chichester and Wilbur Rathbone in attendance on his lady-love.

She hardly glanced at Jerry—forgot to shake hands with him. The poor boy was seized with frantic jealousy. He tried to quarrel with the friendly Fra John and the contemptuous Fra Lionel. He was indifferent to the fond, anxious expression in the eyes of Alison.

At last, goaded to desperation by the artist's obvious pleasure in Rosamond's beauty and the journalist's response to her gay talk, he rose to his feet, clutched at his hat and coat, and fairly bolted out of the house.

Chichester and Rathbone, unconscious of his despair, glanced after him indifferently. Rosamond smiled reassuringly at Alison's troubled expression. Fra John laughed and exclaimed:—"Poor chap!" Fra Lionel muttered, "Idiot!"

They soon forgot all about him, but the boy they had known was gone for ever.

CHAPTER X

Jerry in despair. He meets a new friend at a coffee-stall. Valentine walks home with him and offers to make his fortune.

THE spirit of St. Swithin may have been wandering about Shepherd's Bush when Jerry rushed away from the Fraternity, for it was raining hard in the doleful streets. He turned up his collar—the young sinner, not the old saint—and thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

There was a certain satisfaction in the misery of the night. It suited his mood. He walked quickly, looking neither to the right nor left, as if the lash of an unseen whip were driving him far from the lost Fraternity.

Jerry imagined that Rosamond's behaviour on that particular night had made him furious, but it was really the crisis of many months of jealousy.

His first love had lasted much longer than is usual with callow emotions. It still possessed him, but he was angry with Rosamond for the first time. She had treated him like a foolish boy before men. He would never forgive her. He would love her till the end of his life, but he would never forgive her.

Jerry lodged in Bloomsbury. He turned east on reaching the Bayswater Road, and pelted along at an alarming pace, taking the long hill from Lancaster Gate to Marble Arch as if he were on the last lap of a walking match.

On the crowded pavements of Oxford Street, where nearly every passer-by seemed to be lounging or hurrying towards a night of pleasure, Jerry's mind was distracted from its petty rage and unhappy sense of injury.

The rain had ceased, leaving the sky still lowering with black clouds, the moon plunging through them now and again, only to be overwhelmed and swept back into darkness.

It would have been a grand night for a man to walk alone on the open highway, full of mystery and change in earth and heaven, but Jerry felt the intense loneliness of a city's streets as he had never felt it before. Longing childishly for the glance of a familiar face, he would have greeted the most detested of his fellow students—poor Jerry was beginning to detest everybody at the Slade—with effusive friendliness.

"I wish old Dad and Mum were in London," he thought, perhaps for the first time since they parted.

His racing pace had considerably slackened by the time he reached Holborn. He even stopped outside a music hall, half inclined to go in, allured by the garish lights and gaily coloured posters. But the impulse passed in a feeling of disgust. The recollection of Rosamond's pretty room at the Fraternity, with its faint odour of mignonette, made him hate the very atmosphere of such a place.

Jerry thought of his room in Bloomsbury, well liked in a different mood, as a prison cell, and the nearer he drew the less willing he became to enter it. In the streets at least there were sounds of his fellows and the touch of shoulders.

So he walked on and on into the city, round the dark alleys, by the silent big churches, past the Bank, the old Guildhall, and the gloomy walls of Newgate Prison, even as far as Clerkenwell and the noble arch of St. John's vanished priory, lost in a labyrinth of mean houses.

It was eleven o'clock before Jerry turned his steps westward again. He was fagged and utterly despondent, walking slowly, anxious to get to his bed.

There was a coffee-stall at the corner of a street in Holborn. A grateful smell from the steaming cups of the customers whiffed across Jerry's face. He hesitated, turned from his course and joined the little group of four men and a woman.

The woman was not one of those poor hawks of the streets who are glad of a meagre supper at such a place, but a prim, spare person of the sisterhood engaged at newspaper offices and theatres, where they drudge with scrubbing brushes and pails of dirty water and are woefully misnamed "cleaners." She was dressed in faded black, with her badge of survitude, a coarse apron of sacking, tucked under her arm, and an old, broken-down straw hat on her head trimmed with something that looked like a bunch of dead radishes and a drowned sparrow.

Two of the men were hollow-eyed, narrow-chested, very young fellows, who ate and drank wolfishly, showing the dread signs of abject poverty in threadbare clothes and wretched boots. The third was a respectable young railway porter, who was reading an evening paper and evidently meant to keep himself to himself.

The fourth man was treating the hungry boys and not concealing the fact of his generosity. He was a little man with the collar of his thick overcoat turned up to his ears, his cap pulled down over his face, so that all to be seen of him were dark, twinkling eyes, a short nose, and a particularly wide, full-lipped mouth. His big, uneven white teeth gleamed in a perpetual grimace of real, or assumed, mirth.

"Come, boys, 'nother cup of coffee? That's all right. *And* a couple of these little meat pies. Help yourselves. Good evening, sir! Happy to see you. Better late than never. I'm at home myself and I wish you were!"

The little man nodded in a friendly way to Jerry Cuff, and made room for him to stand at the counter. His voice was thick and hoarse, but he spoke correctly and with a certain cordial, good-humoured bluntness that sounded very pleasant to the worn out Jerry.

"I can highly recommend the sandwiches, sir," continued the little man; "There's plenty of mustard in 'em, flavoured with ham. A fine night for fish, isn't it?"

This was in allusion to the rain which had started once more to patter down. The men stood as closely together as they could under the shelter of the top of the coffee-stall.

For several minutes there was a driving, drenching, lashing storm. They were all silent, except the woman in the straw hat. After watching the mist of slanting rain, for a while, it seemed to be more than she could endure patiently. Looking up at the sky she said, in a severe tone of remonstrance to unseen powers:—

"I say, y'know, a person can't 'ear themselves eat in such an 'ubhub!"

Jerry had aroused the curiosity of the short man with the big mouth. He began to cross-examine him, putting his queries in the form of assertions, concerning his business, age, family, and tastes. Jerry was not amused and answered briefly yes, no, or p'raps. His reticence was not lost upon the other, who laughed cheerily and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"You're quite right, old man, not to chatter before strangers. Look here! I'll walk with you as far as your 'digs,' wherever they may be, as it's dried up a bit. Now, boys——" turning to his shabby friends—"What'll you have to finish up with? 'Another little drink won't do us any harm!'"

"Drink!" repeated one of the boys, wriggling his shoulders miserably under his thin jacket.

"Sorry, boys, but I didn't mean that line of the

good old song to be taken literally," said the short man; "Can't offer you drinks at a coffee-stall, but I never go into a pub. My bill, waiter! Yes, m'lord!"

The keeper of the stall made a rapid calculation, the short man paid, bade the company good night, not forgetting to touch the peak of his cap to the woman, and looked at Jerry to accompany him.

"We can swim along very comfortably now if you like," he said.

"Am I taking you away from your friends?" asked Jerry.

"Those poor devils are not friends of mine, but I saw them hanging round the coffee-stall and offered to treat. I liked your face directly you came up. You looked so chatty and cheerful."

Jerry could not help laughing, for the first time that evening, and told him where he lived.

"That's better!" exclaimed his new acquaintance; "Be happy while you can you're a long time dead. Now we'll go down Holborn till we drop and then turn to the right."

"Do you live in Bloomsbury yourself?" asked Jerry.

"At present I'm stopping at a snug little boarding house in that high class neighbourhood. My name is Valentine and I'm in the profession."

"What profession?" asked Jerry.

"*The* profession. I'm an artist."

"So am I!" exclaimed Jerry; "I'm at the Slade."

"Slade? Slade?" muttered Mr. Valentine; "Never heard of it. That's odd. What's its real name?"

"Why, it's the Art School at University College, Gower Street."

"Fan me quick or I'll faint!" cried the other; "I didn't understand you, my boy. I thought the Slade was slang for one of the halls. I'm not your kind of artist, you know. I'm an old 'pro.'"

"Do you mean an actor?"

"Yes, in variety. I'm Valentine and Orson, acrobatic comedians."

"Both of them?" said Jerry, in surprise.

"Not 'arf! My partner's Orson—one of the Duggleby boys. Ever heard of old Joe Duggleby?"

"Never."

"Well, old Joe Duggleby has got his boys in all branches of the business. They're dancers, trapeze artists, contortionists, jugglers——"

"He must have had a very big family," interrupted Jerry.

"They're not all sons, you know, but they were apprenticed to him and he calls 'em his boys. Now, my partner's a genuine Duggleby, old Joe's great-nephew. He's got the original talent. You'd know he was a genuine Duggleby just to look at him on the stage."

Mr. Valentine spoke seriously, as if his partner were a genuine Crown Derby bowl or Chippendale table.

"So you're a painter of pictures, are you?" he continued, looking at his companion with renewed curiosity; "Well, I suppose even that's interesting when you're in the know. Of course you don't have to stick at it like we do."

"Do you imagine painting pictures is as easy as being an acrobat?" asked Jerry, scornfully.

"I should smile!" exclaimed Valentine; "You don't have to train from seven years of age, and keep yourself 'loosened out' all the year round, well or ill, or rack your brains to think of new 'business.' What sort of pictures do you paint? Posters, or real ones for framing?"

"I haven't painted any that are worth framing," said Jerry, finding it rather hard to reply to the little man's blunt questions; "I'm only a student at present."

"Good Lord! Don't you earn any money at it?"

"I've earned a good deal in my time," said Jerry, "but that was before I went to the Slade."

"And when do you expect to finish off?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Valentine?"

"I mean, how long will it take you to know all there is to be known in your line of business."

"No man ever knows *all* there is to be known about painting."

"Ah, then it's rather like a balancing feat lying on your back—we call it a Risley Act. Your work won't suit old Joe Duggleby, for he believes in being perfect," observed Mr. Valentine, thoughtfully; "Then you don't know how long you'll have to stop at your school?"

"I've half a mind to chuck it up!" exclaimed Jerry, in a sudden burst of confidence; "Something has happened which has made me sick of the whole thing."

"Hard luck, old boy," murmured Valentine, kindly.

"I shall never do any really good work now," continued Jerry, settling into gloom; "I've been wasting my time for months and months. My life's a dead failure. The sooner I get out of it the better."

Valentine looked at him doubtfully for a minute over the collar of his big overcoat, puckered his full lips, hesitated and finally asked the seemingly irrelevant question.

"Are you married?"

The colour leapt into Jerry's face.

"No, I never shall be. What's that got to do with it?" he asked, angrily.

"Nothing, old man, nothing. I am, that's all," said Valentine, in a tone of apology.

Jerry made no reply to the information. They had reached the end of his street. Valentine turned with Jerry and they rapidly approached the house where the boy lodged.

"Yes, I've been married two years," the acrobatic

comedian went on, as agreeably as if his companion had expressed the warmest interest in his affairs; "My wife isn't in the profession any longer. I met her at Blackpool. She's visiting there with her mother now. She used to be a little male impersonator—I mean Mrs. Valentine, not her mother. *She's* too stout to impersonate anybody. Astonishingly stout Mrs. Dobson is to be sure!" he continued, meditatively; "She lives with us, a very masterful disposition—ah, well, she's a kind-hearted woman on the whole. . . . So these are your diggings, are they? Good night. Glad to have met you. I took a fancy to you the minute you stepped up to the coffee-stall. Have you read the works of Charles Dickens?"

"Some of them," said Jerry, who was getting accustomed to his new friend's sudden changes of subject.

"Then you may recollect the character of Mark Tapley. I'm rather like him. It does a man credit to be jolly during a long walk on a wet night in your society, old dear."

Jerry laughed once more. He resolved not to part so easily with such a shrewd, good-humoured fellow.

"I say! Come in and have a look at some of my drawings," he said; "I share the sitting room with the people of the house, but they'll all be in bed and we can have it to ourselves. Come on!"

"Right you are!" said Valentine, promptly.

Jerry opened the door with his latchkey, and the other man followed him into the dark passage. It flashed through Jerry's mind how strongly his father would have disapproved of his conduct, for Mr. Cuff would have instantly suspected burglary on the part of the stranger. Mr. Cuff's rule in life was to reverse the principle of British law by treating all men as guilty until they were found to be innocent.

They went into a small, stuffy room, where Jerry lighted the gas and made it tidy in a couple of

minutes by the simple method of thrusting everything—newspapers, children's toys, the family darning and remains of a supper—under a table in the corner. Then he looked rather ruefully at his guest. Valentine had unfastened his big overcoat and seated himself comfortably in an easy chair.

"I'm afraid I can't offer you anything to drink," Jerry began.

"I don't drink, my boy," interrupted the other; "I'm one of the water-butt brigade. So's my partner. A man can't afford to get his nerves shaky in our line of business. I see there's a dish of apples on the sideboard. May I take one? I'm a demon for fruit—as the little boy said when he stole a bunch of turnips."

"Help yourself," said Jerry; "I'll go upstairs for some of my stuff."

When he returned after a few minutes, laden with his work, he found that Valentine had taken off his overcoat and was sitting on the sofa. His feet were tucked underneath him, in a position that would have been impossible for a man who was not in the acrobatic profession, and he was cutting up an apple with his penknife.

"I don't pretend to be a critic of pictures," he observed, staring at Jerry's load, "but I expect I know as much about them as most people. Nobody admires a good photo, for instance, more than I do."

Jerry hoped that most people knew a great deal more about pictures than Mr. Valentine supposed, judging by his remarks. Sketches seemed to trouble him by their lack of finish. He suggested vaguely that colouring, or perhaps glazing, would improve the general effect. Drawings from models at the Slade puzzled him exceedingly.

"Can't see why you don't do 'em with their clothes on," said Valentine.

Jerry began to talk about anatomy, contour, bones and muscles, warming with his subject.

"Of course I see the point of all that," said the other, thoughtfully chewing the core of the second apple; "But speaking for myself, I like to see a man in smart clothes 'on and off,' and how would women spend their odd time if it wasn't for dressing up? I mean when they've finished their housework, and washing the children, and rowing with their husbands, and all their other little duties."

"Do you think so poorly of women——" began Jerry.

"Poorly? I think they're darlings!" exclaimed Valentine, grinning; "I love them all, even my mother-in-law, although Mrs. Dobson is——" he checked the grin with a sigh—"Well, you couldn't find a better-hearted woman in England. But to return to these—what do you call 'em?—studies from the nude. Is that the only kind of thing you can do? I don't want to be a wet blanket, my boy, but you won't be able to sell these, you know. I mean as posters. No, I do *not* believe that any manager in the variety profession would use them, even if they were supplied in colour *ad lib.*"

"No doubt you're right," agreed Jerry, smiling; "But now I'll show you some of my other attempts. I used to earn good money with them, years ago, in an amateur way. I needn't bother you with the actual facts. Look here! What do you say to this portrait of Darby and Joan dancing together?"

He took one of his old daubs out of a portfolio rarely opened. It represented an old man and woman wildly capering to the music of a street-organ.

Valentine gave his broadest grin.

"Look at the old girl kicking up her heels!" he cried; "The old boy will burst a blood vessel in his head in a minute. That's fine! Grand! Got any more?"

"Just a few," said Jerry, gazing at his companion's beaming face with an odd expression on his own; a look of mingled pleasure and contempt.

All his original drawings, known so well to Alison Booker when first the Cuff family lived in Courtley Gardens, had been destroyed when he went to the Slade. But he had amused himself now and again in the old way, the result being a number of rough sketches, the majority done with the pencil, two or three in colour, of subjects that struck him as amusing or repulsive according to his mood.

Valentine perceived only the fun in them. He was an ignorant, honest fellow, of no subtlety, and the mere vulgarity of Jerry's pictures appealed to him for its truth to life as he saw it himself.

The slowly developed skill and strength of the boy's Slade studies were beyond his judgment, but he understood a broad joke, broadly illustrated, chuckled, and thoroughly enjoyed it.

His manner changed. He looked at Jerry with increasing admiration and respect. Every fresh drawing added to his enthusiasm. He had discovered a genius!

"Do you mean to tell me, my boy," said Valentine, when the portfolio was emptied; "Do you mean to tell me that you're still attending a school and putting money into another man's pockets instead of your own?"

"Yes, I am," said Jerry, with the depression he had forgotten for a little while rushing over him; "I've travelled a very short way upon a long, hard road, Mr. Valentine. Any good artist would tell you that."

"I'm a good artist in my own line, aren't I?" replied the excited little acrobat; "Perhaps I can't tell a first class picture from a second, when it comes to the tricks of the trade, but I know a thing that'll pay. I wasn't trained by old Joe Duggleby for nothing. My boy, you've got a fortune in your hands."

"What!" cried Jerry, his blood leaping to the word; "How can I make a fortune? It's absurd—impossible——"

"If you do as I tell you and let me show you the ropes," said Valentine, solemnly, "I'll guarantee to put you on the halls with a turn that will 'top the bill' in less than a year. Top the bill!"

"Is that to be the height of my ambition?" said Jerry, half amused, half delighted.

"Yes, old boy. Follow my advice, give up your school, make friends with old Joe Duggleby, and stick to your comic work. Will you do it? Yes or no. Strike while the iron's hot!"

Jerry was silent for a minute, looking down at the pile of his Slade drawings. Then he shrugged his shoulders, pushed them roughly on one side, and held out his hand to Valentine.

"I'll do it!" he said.

CHAPTER XI

Alison sees Wilbur Rathbone for the first time. They talk at the Fraternity. The beauty of weaving. "How happy could I be with either——"

WHILE Jerry Cuff was plodding through the rain, alternately loving and hating Rosamond Courtley, the friends he had left behind at the Fraternity of St. Swithin were passing their time very agreeably without him.

Rosamond was in happy mood, conscious of pleasing and being pleased. She did not so much monopolise the talk, as dominate it. Chichester responded to her with the frankness of a man who thinks himself so middle-aged, and far removed from any girl, as to be able to admire her quite disinterestedly. He would have been amazed to know that the twenties were behind her.

Wilbur Rathbone was rather tired, at the end of his week's work, and willing enough to be amused without making any exertion.

He had been glad to meet Alison, but her old habit of shyness with editors caused a certain stiffness in her manner which was not conciliating. It had lasted only a few minutes, banished by his kind expression, but at the end of the fatal few minutes Rosamond happened to call him away.

The fortunes of the Fraternity were thoroughly discussed. While the Brotherhood had increased, the list of pupils was not encouraging. Old frequenters of the Grapes public house did not approve of the

advent of St. Swithin. The women in the immediate neighbourhood were hopelessly conversative in their ways. A few boys were learning carpentry, a few girls spinning, but the real popularity of the house was found to be its wholesome and cheap buns and cakes.

Rosamond, being a good cook, had started making them in her spare time. Her two friends, Mrs. Grain and Lucy Stacey, helped her, but looked upon their success with contempt.

"I believe if we were to make bread, and turn the place into a model bakery, nobody would miss the Fraternity," said Rosamond, plaintively.

Mrs. Grain, who was a little, pale, mousey woman with round spectacles, sighed deeply and agreed.

"If you think of doing that, Miss Courtley, why not open a cooked meat shop at once?" asked Lucy Stacey, a thin, earnest, dreamy-looking girl, who wore hand-woven frocks of her own design and sandals of her own making.

"I could cut the sandwiches with great dexterity," put in Fra John.

"And I could go round the streets with a basket on my back full of new loaves," said Fra Lionel, dismally; "Of all the abominations in distributing food I think that is one of the worst."

"What you say shows there is room for Miss Courtley to become a true reformer in the bakery business," observed Rathbone; "I imagine that is as old and honourable an occupation as weaving."

"But I don't want to be a baker!" cried Rosamond; "I only like fancy cookery—'the afters' as we used to call them at home—pastry and puddings and sweets."

"Oh, you should live on unfired food as I do," said Miss Stacey.

"Does it matter what one eats?" said Fra Lionel, impatiently; "It's always a hateful waste of time. It horrifies me when I think of the hundreds

of thousands of people who spend their existence in preparing food for gluttons to devour."

"Hundreds of thousands?" repeated exact little Mrs. Grain; "Isn't that a big exaggeration?"

"A trifle perhaps," said Rosamond; "But seriously, how few there are who think of the years of their lives that most women devote to getting meals. What do you say, Ally?"

"What would you suggest in place of meals if we get rid of them?" asked Alison, smiling at her friend.

"I mean set meals—elaborate meals—the art of cookery which has superseded its simplicity."

"That's a good phrase, Miss Courtley," said Rathbone, gravely; "Instead of preaching 'Back to the land,' let us get back to the plain boiled potato."

Alison secretly resented his tone, for she thought he was laughing at Rosamond. Turning to Chichester, she abruptly changed the subject. Later in the evening, when Rosamond took them upstairs to see her big loom, Rathbone seized the opportunity to speak to Alison again. He could see nothing of the writer of her books in the shy, rather awkward young woman overshadowed by her friend.

"I'm afraid the *Wire* has slipped your memory, Miss Booker," he began; "My colleague, Oliver, was regretting the other night you had not been in to see him for some time, and I know you haven't sent us any of your capital sketches."

Alison suddenly smiled, amused at his words.

"I'm surprised to hear that Mr. Oliver regrets not seeing me," she answered; "Last time I called it was to tell him that I couldn't send anything to the *Daily Wire* for some time, because I was finishing my new novel."

"He didn't tell me that."

"Of course he has forgotten," Alison went on; "He looked at me very gravely and said, 'Then we must try to carry on the paper without you, Miss

Booker. There's one consolation, the public won't know what it has missed.' "

It was Rathbone's turn to smile. He liked her for telling the little story against herself.

"Well, we've been doing our best," he said; "But you mustn't leave us too long in the lurch."

"Do I deserve that, Mr. Rathbone? Mr. Oliver sometimes makes me too nervous to go down Shackle Lane—" the office of the *Daily Wire* was in Shackle Lane—"but if you are going to be sarcastic too I shall be frightened to walk along Fleet Street."

"I've never met a modern novelist who was frightened of anything," said Rathbone.

"Then I must be the one exception to the rule."

"That is an implied reproof, Miss Booker, for boasting that I knew them all. But seriously, when are we going to hear from you? Is the new book nearly done? What is it to be called?"

Alison did not answer for a minute. She had not told anyone, except her mother, the title.

"Perhaps it is to be kept a secret until it bursts upon us in—in—Messrs. Merrickson's Spring list," continued Rathbone; "You see what a great student I must be of your work for I can even remember who is your publisher."

"I think the name of my book will be 'Euphrosyne.' "

"Euphrosyne?" he repeated it two or three times, thoughtfully; "I wonder whether you are going to tell us about the Goddess of Mirth up to date, but I mustn't ask. Do you know that St. Catherine of Siena was called Euphrosyne, or Joy, in her girlhood? I can't quite see you as the biographer of a saint, but I'm not certain about it—" he hesitated, smiling at her.

"Do you like the name as a title, Mr. Rathbone?"

"Well, I'm not swept off my feet by it. Of course it is one of the two possible titles for a novel."

"How do you mean?"

"A good title and—just a title. 'Euphrosyne,' in my opinion, is the latter. You may have another idea before the book is finished. But I mustn't forget that I shall not be the only reader of Euphrosyne's story, although I flatter myself I shall be one of her most ardent lovers."

"How absurd you are, Mr. Rathbone!" said Alison, then she added, with mock seriousness:—"I wish you wrote the reviews in the *Daily Wire*."

"Why do you wish that?"

"Because they are always so much too critical. I was given half a column last time."

"Did you consider it a bad notice?"

"No, most helpful, but rather severe and too short."

"My dear young lady, half a column too short! Have you ever looked at our literary paragraphs on the fourth page on Fridays? Sometimes a dozen novels are worked off in half a column."

"I know! I know!" exclaimed Alison, in a distressed voice; "Don't think I'm so conceited as to imagine my books are worth more than a few lines. I only meant the review was so keen and thoughtful that I longed for a great deal more."

Rathbone made a bow.

"Thank you," he said, earnestly; "I wrote it."

Before Alison could answer—rather to her relief if the truth were told—Rosamond called to everyone to gather round the loom.

Chichester knew all about weaving, but Rathbone asked abstracted questions that she was only too ready to answer, while Fra John, who had set up the warp, hung about it with the interest and affection of its maker. Fra Lionel, tired of the company, took a book out of his pocket and read for the rest of the evening, neither troubling to speak nor answer anyone who spoke to him.

It always gave Alison pleasure to watch Rosamond at the loom.

Every movement of a woman weaving is full of

grace. It is as if she played on an old instrument of music, all her form harmonious. The swing of the shoulders and supple waist as she bends from side to side, the use of the springy feet upon the treadles, the vigour and strength of the pull at the batten, the skill of throwing the shuttle from hand to hand between the threads of the warp, the spread of the arms, the curve of the throat, the expression of the face that is born of pleasurable work, quiet, intent, but alert and earnest—it all appeals to our sense of beauty.

Such labour is akin to everything that is fair and fitting in human effort by its call for strength and endurance, patience and joy, in the doing.

* * * * *

Chichester stood beside the loom, watching the progress of the work, making a drawing in his mind of Rosamond. Alison thought how benign and handsome he looked, standing absolutely still with his fine head bent down and his powerful hands quietly folded before him.

She suddenly remembered, for no apparent reason, the garden and orchard of his house at Esher; it seemed a happy place, in its peace and loveliness, for such an artist, so different from the London which surrounded St. Swithin's, the London of noise and unrest, poverty and despair.

Alison was weary, weary to the heart of London, and looked upon it with jaundiced eyes.

While these thoughts were passing through her mind she became conscious of the fact that someone—who was it—Fra John?—was looking at her.

She turned her eyes from Rosamond and met the full gaze of Rathbone. Fra John was far too absorbed in his loom to think of anything else.

She had looked at Rathbone when they talked, of course, but now there was the length of half a room between them and she seemed to see him for the first time, for he did not speak to distract her.

She saw how spare he was and how tall; the keen, penetrating expression of his eyes; the uneven shape of his closely shut mouth, finely drawn, but a little crooked on the left side; the network of tiny wrinkles and criss-cross lines in his forehead and about the chin; the darkness of his hair, almost black; the poise and ease of his whole bearing.

An odd little thought occurred to her. One has often heard it said that every human being resembles in some way or another, given a touch of caricature, an animal or bird, but if she had been asked to find the creature of whom Rathbone reminded her, she would have answered:—"It can't be done, for he's too like a man."

She smiled at her odd little thought. Rathbone had suddenly aroused her interest—not as the editor of the *Daily Wire*, but for his own sake—and she hoped he would speak to her again.

Many women, Rosamond among them, would have promptly given him the opportunity, but Alison did not take one tiny step in that direction.

She was surprised at herself for having told him the name of the new novel. Already she had decided to alter it, although she was far from taking the advice of any stranger upon her work. Would it be possible to ask him to read the opening chapters? Daring thought! The beginning of the book was original and quaintly written, but made her a little nervous. It would be exciting to hear his opinion.

Alison did not hear Rosamond and Fra John discussing the loom, while Chichester talked of the possibilities of dying home-spuns with beautiful natural dyes—saffron, sage green, heather purple, russet brown—for the people of her story had gathered round her, shadowy forms of imagination, and she was lost in the dear illusion of their reality.

Rathbone marked and wondered at her silence. Long experience of writers led him to expect many words from so good a novelist. He would have

thought the Fraternity did not appeal to her if he had not seen, now and again, with what appreciation and sympathy she looked and listened to Rosamond.

Her friendship with Chichester was shown by them both in the frankness and easy assurance of being understood by each other. She seemed to have nothing to say to either of the other two men, or to Mrs. Grain and Miss Stacey.

The more he looked at Alison, the more he liked her. If only she had had the beauty of her friend! If only her friend had had the gentleness of her expression in repose. The lines of an old song occurred to him, bringing a smile for accompaniment:—

“How happy could I be with either,
Were t’other dear charmer away!”

* * * * *

Three hours passed as one. There was a fundamental sympathy and feeling of good fellowship in all Rosamond’s friends, with the exception perhaps of Fra Lionel Ford, who sat apart absorbed in his book.

They were loth to part, even when it was past the time to go. Fra John said he would walk with Chichester to the railway station. Rathbone offered to take Alison home. Mrs. Grain and Lucy Stacey changed their sandals for walking boots, in deference to the prejudices of Shepherd’s Bush, and departed together, arm in arm, discussing the possibility of returning to the distaff of their foremothers. The adoption of the spinning wheel, both ladies declared, had been the first step of civilized women in the wrong direction.

Rosamond stood at the door, under the sign of St. Swithin, speeding her parting guests.

The melancholy Fra Lionel disdained the formality of leave-taking, and considered it a barbarous custom to shake hands. So he nodded all round and stalked away by himself.

CHAPTER XII

The shortest in the book, but not the least important.

WHY do the great hours of life come to us all unexpectedly?

If we did but see the Spring of our Summer, the dawn of our day's high noon, then we could meet it with conscious joy. But it comes as swiftly as the wind—it leaps into being full blown.

When Alison Booker turned away from the door of the Fraternity of St. Swithin she would have been amazed to know that her past and future, her memories and her hopes, would be centred upon that night.

It was so late that the streets were quiet. The rain-washed sky was grey with moonlight, silvery and mysterious. The darkened windows of the houses suggested sleep with the end of toil. The air was fresh, as if the breath of the great city had been swept away by the rushing winds of the open country.

Alison had often been abroad at such an hour, in the days when she was interviewing at theatres for the *Arrow*, but not since her work kept her at home. Day or night were very much the same to Wilbur Rathbone. They agreed, without a spoken word, to walk. The driver of the only taxi which passed them, between the Fraternity and Courtley Gardens, pretended not to see Rathbone's slight gesture to stop him.

They turned from the main road down Amber Lane, a narrow pathway leading to Kensington. There were high walls on either side, where straggling ivy and Virginia creeper hung over the top, decked with a few withered leaves here and there. One part of the lane widened to the stretch of the boughs of some ancient oaks, growing far apart, with the great boles in between them of their brothers long fallen beneath the axe.

It was called Amber Lane in honour of some laburnum trees at the Kensington end, once luxurious, but reduced in the passing of time to a small number, still lovely in their season.

Rathbone did not know the little lane. Alison told him it was said to be haunted; she had loved it all her life, but had never seen the ghost.

They talked of her book; of journalism; of flowers and perfumes; of old legends and modern poetry; of the meaning of life and art; of Jerry Cuff and uncle Jonah; of the Fraternity of St. Swithin and Ruskin's Guild of St. George—but a mere list of spoken words conveys no idea of their happy sense of companionship. It was as if they had met after a long absence from each other, an absence as long as life itself, so that each had to learn the other's view-point, only remembering the old sympathy.

The pleasure of the too short hour was far greater for Alison than for Rathbone. He was a man of many friends, both men and women, but she was unused to self-expression and reticent to a fault.

He did not make the error of taking her too seriously, although he was never flippant, but challenged her lightly to talk well and without any effort, for his quick appreciation of a touch of humour, or grasp of half spoken thoughts, lightened her spirit. She was gay and charming, unconsciously winning his admiration and revealing her hidden self.

Amber Lane twisted and turned, now with a little hill to break its monotony, now into darkness of

slumberous cedars, now into the light of its scattered lamps, always bordered by the high brick walls.

When the two passed out of it into Kensington Road, and looked back for a minute, it seemed to vanish into shadow like a dream when one awakes.

Dull little Courtley Gardens was fast asleep, with all its narrow doors locked and its peeping little windows shut.

Alison became conventional as her feet stopped at her own door.

"I'm afraid you have come a long way in the wrong direction, Mr. Rathbone," she said; "You live in the West End, do you not?"

"West Central. My rooms are in Margaret Chambers, Savoy."

"What a long way to go!"

"Not a bit of it. Every Londoner ought to know Courtley Gardens, but I hadn't heard of it before to-night. Had you ever heard of Margaret Chambers?"

"Yes, indeed! It's an old fashioned row of high houses, turning off the Strand towards Waterloo bridge. They overlook the river."

"Quite! I wish you could walk there with me now—say to supper."

"I wish I could!" said Alison, laughing.

"Good-bye! Come along to see me at the *Wire* office, whenever you're in that part of the world. Between half-past eight and nine is my best time—can't see anybody earlier or later than that. Don't ask for that old rascal, Oliver. He doesn't deserve to have a visitor."

Alison went into the dark house, carefully fastening the front door with the chain before she crept upstairs. She knew her mother's first question, if she woke, would be:—"Have you put up the chain?" Uncle Jonah also took a great interest in the chain. If the front door had been a fierce dog they could not have shown greater anxiety for it to be chained.

Alison listened outside her uncle's room for a

minute. All was quiet, except for his laboured breathing.

Her mother was also asleep. Alison tip-toed across the floor and opened one of the slats of the blind to peer into the street. She had a foolish hope of seeing Rathbone again, but of course he was out of sight.

The pleasure of their walk and talk together was her last thought as she fell asleep, her first on waking in the morning.

A dreamless sleep had not weakened the impression he had made. She looked forward eagerly to seeing him again, but with a little trepidation at the memory of her own frankness. She had spoken more unreservedly to a stranger than to her own people, even more boldly than to her beloved Rosamond.

The day following her meeting with Rathbone Alison was moved, by an unaccountable impulse, to break the last, feeble thread of sentiment that bound her to her first love.

She had not thought of Barrington Chase for months. His pompous, editorial notes, once so prized and known by heart, had all been destroyed. His single present of a handsomely bound book of humorous verse—a Press copy, by the way, sent to the *Arrow* for review—had been given to a girl friend, and all that remained of the old tie was a sealed envelope hidden at the back of a drawer.

Alison found the envelope, when her mother was out of the room, and carried it upstairs to her little study. She shut herself in, sat down at her desk, and broke the seal. There was only one sheet of paper, covered with writing on both sides.

It was her own love letter to Barrington, written on the night of the day when he had kissed her, and she had returned his kisses, the first, last time.

Alison remembered the opening lines, but not the whole of the letter. She read it again slowly, twice over.

Astonishing letter! It was so young, so fervent, so

tender—and so badly constructed. She fully realized the change in herself in recalling her emotion when it was written to Barrington Chase. There was the folly and the sadness in a sentence. It was written to Barrington Chase!

She pictured Barrington in her mind with damaging clearness in his little office, patron of contributors, lord of the office boy, slowly turning about in his swivel chair, like a great top at the end of a spin.

She remembered his big hands, given to pawing, soft and warm.

Oh, how she hated the man!

No, that was not true. He had helped her with her work; he had his good points; he was even amusing to recollect, with his talk of "tactical errors" and "comprehensive paragraphs," and full-mouthed word of approval—"Good!"

Alison turned the four-year-old letter in her hands and began to tear it, but she suddenly paused, frowned, smiled, and shook her head. After all, it was a very good letter, better than she could write at this time, in spite of its dashes, notes of exclamation and repetitions.

She wanted a young girl's love letter in her new novel. Then she thought of the tears and kisses which had fallen on this sheet of paper. Her fingers itched to destroy it—but still—why not?—never waste "copy." She carefully tore away the end of the page, where his name was written, and put it back in its old place, scribbling across the envelope:—"Love letter to be used in novel."

Then she stood still for a minute and burst out laughing.

* * * * *

It was a couple of weeks before Alison called at the *Daily Wire* office.

She was unfortunate, for Rathbone happened to

be exceptionally busy, and John Oliver came into the room.

There was a piece of paper lying on Rathbone's writing table :—" Make up to-night at 1.30." It was only a quarter to nine, but the men looked as if the hands of the clock would spin round the dial to half-past one while they were exchanging half-a-dozen sentences with Miss Booker.

She had armed herself with a short story, dreading that Rathbone, after a manner not unknown to editors, would conveniently have forgotten all about his invitation. It was the humourous story which Barrington Chase had once mistaken for a serious effort. She was anxious to leave it with Rathbone for his opinion, not as a contribution to his paper.

He was interested at once, and thrust the manuscript into the pocket of his overcoat hanging on the wall.

" I'm glad your story is for Mr. Rathbone's home consumption," said Oliver; " I'm afraid we are too busy here to read long manuscripts while the author waits."

" I didn't begin to write this morning," said Alison, as she rose to go; " I have a little more experience than to expect that, Mr. Oliver."

" Experience," said Oliver, irrelevantly, " is of no use, except to you and me and other people who can do good work."

" Doesn't it improve the poor writers?" she asked.

" No—makes 'em worse," said Oliver, grimly.

Rathbone opened the door and followed her for a minute into the passage outside.

" How goes the novel?" he asked, in his quick, keen way; " Have you repented of your good impulse to let me have a glimpse at it?"

" No, indeed. Shall I post it to this office?"

" Better address it to my place, 7, Margaret Chambers, Savoy. Will you remember that?"

" Yes. Good night."

" Good night. So glad to have seen you, but I'm in a tear this evening—7, Margaret Chambers—bye-bye ! "

Alison went downstairs and out into the street possessed by a feeling of restored energy and lightness of heart.

She had been very depressed all day, but five minutes with Wilbur Rathbone had turned the current of her thoughts and actually revived her physical strength. It was inexplicable, but very delightful.

She walked a great part of the way home. A sensation of youth and airy happiness quickened her blood. The long habit of melancholy was broken for a little while.

Every man to his own work at his best ! Alison had finished her new book in imagination, read the enraptured reviews, written a five-act play and seen it successfully produced, before she reached home.

CHAPTER XIII

Jerry Cuff makes the acquaintance of Joe Duggleby. Tea and games. A word of advice from old Joe. An idea occurs to Jerry, but Valentine does not approve of it. The first appearance of Gerado, Lightning Artist.

JERRY CUFF was introduced into the variety world (strange that one of the most conservative and unchanging of little worlds should be described by such a word as variety) with due formality by his new friend.

Edward Valentine was so favourably impressed by Jerry's sketches that he had talked about them, within twelve hours of their meeting, to his partner, half a dozen other professional friends, his landlady, the men on either side of him in the train, the stage manager, and the dresser at the music hall where he was performing at night. He had also written to the absent Mrs. Valentine that "Jerry was the finest drawer he had ever come across."

His partner, Orson—in private life Mr. Jack Duggleby—did not share Valentine's optimism regarding the young artist's future career on the stage. Orson was of a silent, not to say morose, disposition, perhaps the result of five years as an acrobatic comedian after being employed all his childhood, as a human dumb-bell, by a bad-tempered uncle known as the modern Ajax.

Orson, being one of the great family of Duggleby, looked upon every newcomer in his profession as a

possible usurper of the rights of the reigning house. It was useless to point out to him that even the Dugglebys and their connections could not supply all the music halls in the country, for his only reply was to put his hands in his pockets and whistle. He had a particularly loud, aggravating whistle.

Jerry went to see his new friend and partner give their performance, at the Gem music hall, soon after making their acquaintance. His childish recollections of the old story of Valentine and Orson hardly prepared him for their stage appearance. Valentine wore tennis flannels and a straw hat, while Orson "made up" to look like a kind of pre-historic man, with a battered hat on his head and boots with long, flapping toes on his feet.

He found the acrobatic part of the show both daring and clever, but the comedy bored him. It was surprising how a grown audience could laugh at such tomfoolery. The whole programme struck Jerry, whom Rosamond and Alison had encouraged to see good plays and good acting, as silly in the extreme.

Of course he kept this opinion discreetly to himself when he next met Valentine. His praise rather disappointed the little man.

"I'm glad you like our knock-about business, Jerry," he said, "but it's the patter and the comic work that pays. Every laugh a man gets in the halls puts a pound on his salary. That's why I believe you'll go all right, when we've got the turn into shape, for you must have been born funny to do those pictures."

Jerry shrugged his shoulders and made no answer.

"It's an odd thing," continued Valentine, "Most of the comical chaps I've met are quiet and serious when you come to know them. Look at Orson! He's always solemn and sulky at home. I never see you laugh. Now, Mrs. Dobson, my mother-in-law, used to be a reg'lar show woman, six feet high and full of dignity—she appeared in pantomimes as

Britannias or Junos, you know the kind of thing—but off the stage she's as playful and lively as a kitten."

Jerry had nothing to say about Mrs. Dobson. He was generally amused by Valentine's chatter, but he was still too sore and unhappy to be keenly interested in his friend's plans for the future.

The touchstone of his love for Rosamond had found the flaw in his nature. It left him embittered; he mistook his anger for despair, persuading himself that she had thrown him aside after long encouragement.

Jerry confided in no one, but he brooded over his injury until his passion grew perilously near to hatred.

He treated Valentine and Orson with a certain lordliness that they both endured, the former with a good, the latter with a bad, grace, and managed to convey the idea that he was doing them a favour by accepting their help. His own notions of a "turn" were hazy, but he was cunning enough to hide his ignorance.

Jerry's introduction to the redoubtable old Joe Duggleby was grandly formal.

He was invited to tea at Clapham, where old Joe lived in retirement with one of his nephews, his nephew's wife, and their young family.

Old Joe was an aged man, but still upright and extraordinarily fit, with the eye of a martinet, though a little dimmed by years, and the steady nerve of an equilibrist. His small moustache was waxed at the points, his teeth were perfect (five guinea set), and he wore a diamond ring of the first water on his little finger.

His relatives and visitors approached him with great deference, the small servant girl nearly jumped out of her boots when he spoke to her, and the baby was the only person who treated him as an equal.

Mr. Duggleby was not a talker. When any subject was broached that had nothing to do with his old profession he wisely held his tongue, for he was very

ignorant of other matters. He smoked one cigar a day, ate most sparingly, and had the habit of taking a little exercise at intervals in a way that surprised strange visitors.

He would rise from his chair, for instance, and solemnly pass one leg and then the other over the back, or take a few high kicks at a ball hung up for the purpose, or stoop forward to touch his toes without bending his knees, or "loosen himself out," as acrobats call it, by any other mild method that occurred to him at the minute.

Although he was so moderate himself, the Duggleby tea was a long, nondescript meal—plates and plates of thin bread and butter, cold ham, radishes, jam and marmalade overflowing their glass dishes, and such a noble display of fresh lettuces and watercresses that it suggested a little Birnam wood, starting off for Dunsinane, as it passed from one end of the table to the other.

Jerry supposed that the whole strength of the family had been expended on such a tea, especially as all the ladies in the party went into the kitchen to help young Mrs. Duggleby to wash up, but he was mistaken.

After an interval of light music, conversation, sweets and cigarettes, supper was announced, and the green-stuff made its second appearance with cold bacon, sausage rolls, tarts and jellies. There were enough bottles of ginger ale and lemonade to fill a stall on Hampstead Heath on Bank Holiday, not to mention "minerals and alkaholes" as young Mrs. Duggleby called the other drinks.

The rest of the evening was spent in games, the favourite being a variation of Musical Chairs, a little too strenuous, perhaps, for a less acrobatic and well trained company, for when Mrs. Duggleby broke off playing the piano everybody had to sit down upon the floor as quickly as possible, the last on his feet being liable to a forfeit. It was much enjoyed and called Musical Bumps. Jerry managed to be "out,"

as soon as he could, for the sake of talking to his host.

Old Joe was not encouraging to a beginner, for he frankly told him he must be prepared to consider himself "a bar turn."

"But I have no idea of performing on horizontal bars, Mr. Duggleby!" exclaimed the young man, somewhat indignantly.

"That's not what I mean," said old Joe, speaking very slowly and distinctly, as if he thought his visitor must either be deaf or feeble-minded; "When I say you'll be a bar turn, I mean the people will go away to have a drink at the bar while you're on the stage."

"Valentine thinks very differently," said Jerry; "He says there hasn't been a good man in my line in the halls for years."

Old Joe glanced at Valentine, who was musical bumping with great energy.

"Ned Valentine was always a loud-tongued, short-legged cock sparrow," he said.

"I suppose he knows his business, Mr. Duggleby."

"A man can know his business all right and still be a loud-tongued, short-legged cock sparrow," said old Joe, firmly; "I've no doubt he'll give you some good tips, but I wish you'd something to fall back upon if you make a frost with your droring."

"I can't sing or dance, or play any instrument——" began Jerry.

"And I'll swear you couldn't make anybody laugh," interrupted old Joe, studying his companion's face; "You must brisk up when you go on the stage, my boy, and look as if you was enjoying yourself."

"Perhaps I shall feel in the mood then, Mr. Duggleby."

"Mood!" repeated old Joe, scornfully; "You must always be in the mood when you're before the public. I didn't let my boys have no moods. Never mind if your back aches and your joints crack—*give a good show.*"

"I don't believe an audience ever appreciates either the hardships or the beauty of your work," said Jerry, who had a pagan's admiration for physical perfection.

"It's only their ignorance, my boy. People is so under-educated," said old Joe, quietly.

Jerry glanced at his thin face, clear-skinned, bright-eyed; at his virile body, hardly touched by age. He thought of the number of men who had lived as many years in the world—ponderous, indolent, repulsive with self-indulgence in the past and the present—and a feeling came over him that was half respect, half affection, for old Joe Duggleby.

Valentine was loud in his praises, directly they left the house, and questioned Jerry Cuff with his usual curiosity.

"I'm sure the old boy has taken a fancy to you, Jerry."

"I can't say he showed it, Ned."

"He spoke to you, didn't he? If he hadn't liked you he wouldn't have said a word all the evening."

"I told him your idea of doing lightning sketches on huge sheets of paper, Ned. I must begin to practise. Look here!" exclaimed Jerry, after a pause; "What do you think of making caricatures of members of the audience?"

"It would only offend them. I wouldn't attempt it if I were you," returned Valentine.

"I shall!" said Jerry, obstinately; "Of course I won't hurt their feelings, but it would make all the rest of the people grin."

"It couldn't be done in the time, Jerry."

"Yes, it could. You don't realize what I can do. I'm not going to have a turn like yours, the same thing night after night."

"Of course you know best, old man," said Valentine, who had been on the stage for twenty years.

"I should hope I do!" said Jerry, who had never been on the stage at all.

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Jerry made his first appearance, as a "trial turn," at a small suburban music hall where the manager was glad to do his friend, Edward Valentine, a favour.

Jerry assumed the name of Gerado. He wore the regulation suit of a painter on the stage—knickerbockers, a black velvet coat and a flowing white silk tie. He looked like the street artist of the past suddenly grown into a man.

Whatever Gerado lacked, it was not self-importance. He had no gift for reading character, but he knew that commonplace men take another commonplace man at his own valuation. So he walked on to the stage, the morning before his first appearance, with the manner (as Valentine said) of an old "pro."

"My easel will stand in the centre—here," he commanded; "Now, what scenery can you give me and how about your lights?"

The chief carpenter stared at him witheringly for a full minute, but Jerry did not wither. He puffed away at a big cigar with the coolness of a man who was used to obedience.

"Bert, let down the oriental 'all," shouted the carpenter to an unseen mate, somewhere in the shadows up above.

Gerado graciously approved of the oriental hall, an old cloth, painted with Chinese dragons and gilded scrolls, leading to a pagoda in perspective.

"We've got a couple of gold French chairs to go with this, and there y'are!" said the carpenter.

The lights were not so easy to arrange. Jerry insisted upon seeing them, with a courage that only a very old, or a very raw, performer would have dared to show.

The man below and his mate above called for "Limes." But Limes, like a spirit from the vasty deep, refused to come when they did call on him.

Jerry was considerably puzzled by the word, having no idea that electricians in a theatre still retain their old name from the days of limelight.

When Limes appeared at last, having gone out for an hour or so to see whether it was raining, he showed an amiable stupidity that exasperated Jerry, ignorant of the characteristics of his tribe. When Limes was asked to put on a white light, he promptly put on a green one; when he was begged for ruby, he flooded the stage with yellow; he focussed on the top of the easel or the artist's boots, and generally kept his mates busy giving him directions.

Valentine and his partner were unable to be present at night, as they were appearing in another hall. There was not a man or woman whom Jerry knew to wish him good luck.

He stood in the wings, before his turn, outwardly calm, but with a nervous twitching of his lips and a frightened expression in his blue eyes. It would have been difficult for him to describe his feelings. He hoped for success, but not ardently, for he looked upon his unaccustomed surroundings with the unspoilt, critical judgment of youth, fully alive to the tawdry scenery, the loud, rattling orchestra in the distance, the painted faces of the women, the coarse and grotesque appearance of the men, the bad air, the inanity and buffoonery of the whole performance.

What would Rosamond Courtley think of it all—Alison—George Chichester? An angry flush of shame, or pride, spread over his face.

Did it matter, he thought, whether he succeeded or failed, lived or died? Who cared, except the old Dad and Mum, and he had not written to them, or thought of them, since the night when he left the Fraternity of St. Swithin for the last time.

"Now then, where's that extra turn?" said the sharp voice of the stage manager, looking vaguely about him as he pressed the orchestra bell; "Here, Mr. What's-your-name! Got all your 'props'? You follow this song, you know. Hurry up with the gold chairs for the hall cloth, Jim. Right-oh! Clear!"

It was all confusion to Jerry for a couple of minutes, the only thing that he remembered being the stage manager, wearing his hat tilted far back from his round, good-humoured face.

The curtain rose.

Gerado was in the glare of sudden light, with only a dozen pieces of white paper and a box of coloured chalks to save him from ruin.

For a breathing space his eyes failed him and his practised hand shook like a feather in the wind, then the words of old Joe Duggleby seemed to be flashed on the blank sheet in front of him on the easel:—

“You’re before the public . . . *give a good show!*”

It steadied and nerved him. He drew the outline of a face in a single sweep, added a few rapid strokes of black, a dash of scarlet, a blur of shadow, a written word, a smile, a bow—and it was done.

Jerry had gained his first applause and he never looked back.

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“Capital! Capital! Fust rate!” exclaimed the excited voice of good little Ned Valentine, as the successful artist came off the stage; “I cut away d’reckly we’d done and got here just in time to see you finish. You’ve gone immense for a trial turn. Immense! Don’t you feel proud of yourself, Jerry?”

“I think it was all right, Ned, but you needn’t make a scene, old boy,” replied Gerado, smiling at his friend with kindly patronage.

CHAPTER XIV

Time passes. News of the Fraternity. Spring again in Chichester's orchard. Rathbone's thoughts of Alison and her thoughts of him.

CHICHESTER's orchard was again in blossom.

It was the Spring of a new year. Rosamond and Alison were sitting at the edge of the field of daffodils on an April afternoon. The artist had asked them both to spend the day at his house in Esher. They were alone for the first time since their arrival, hastily comparing impressions.

Chichester had passed the Winter in Italy; Rosamond in Shepherd's Bush, with the break of a Christmas at her country home; Alison, as usual, with her mother and uncle Jonah in Courtley Gardens.

The Fraternity of St. Swithin prospered. Fra John Hooper had set up three new looms. Fra Lionel Ford and three apprentices were earning a living wage. Rosamond had added bread making to the popularity of her cakes and buns. Mrs. Grain and Lucy Stacey had classes for simple dressmaking, all to be done by hand.

The success of her scheme had improved Rosamond, although her first enthusiasm had changed to a more cool, practical outlook. She had just arranged to take a vacant house next door to St. Swithin's, as the Fraternity was fast outgrowing its original home.

She was talking of this new venture to Alison, as

they looked at the blossoming fruit trees of the orchard. Rosamond was evidently enjoying the excitement and work, but not with her old self-assurance. Rent, taxes, increased outlay, and all the other responsibilities of a bigger place made her anxious.

She was still the head of the Fraternity—St. Swithin's vicegerent as it were—but time had insensibly lessened her personal power. Fra John was a better organizer. Mrs. Grain had discovered that her adored Miss Courtley was not a steady worker, but a creature of many moods. Lucy Stacey openly rebelled at the little bakery business.

The quickest weaver, recently enrolled in the Fraternity, was far too mercenary and too clever. That this young woman—only twenty two, as pretty as she was capable—treated her with becoming deference and a show of affection, did not deceive Rosamond. With the intuition of a woman, judging a woman, she knew that Kate Browning was a dangerous rival.

Kate was a red-haired girl, short and small, not equal to Rosamond in appearance, manner, mind nor education. Alison called her insignificant. Mrs. Grain and Miss Stacey said she was a "bromide." Fra Lionel frankly detested her, and Fra John laughed at the way she bustled and chirruped about the place, as if they all depended upon her energy and good temper.

"Why don't you get rid of the girl?" said Alison, after hearing all about Kate Browning's officious suggestions for the arrangements of the new house.

"I can't be ungenerous, Ally. She is always talking about her devotion to the Fraternity and to me."

"She could easily find other employment, Rosamond."

"That's the worst of it—she's so clever, Alison. We should miss her dreadfully, as far as the weaving is concerned."

"Perhaps she is really fond of you, darling."

Rosamond shook her head decisively.

"Oh, no! I know when anyone is really fond of me, man or woman. Mark my words, Alison, Kate Browning is only fond of two people in our house."

"Two?" said Alison.

"Yes, herself and John Hooper."

"Fra John? What makes you think so?"

"Trifles, too slight to be repeated. He is quite unaware of it at present, but that doesn't matter. Don't look so solemn, Alison. I won't let her turn me out until I choose to go."

"How can she turn you out of your own house, dear?" cried Alison, indignantly.

Rosamond drew her cloak more closely round her shoulders, for the brief warmth of the April day was nearly over. She leaned forward on the stone seat, her hands clasped on her knees.

She was dressed in a gown of her own weaving, golden-brown, soft and thick, with a broad-brimmed hat of the same colour, and wore a long string of amber beads round her neck. Her russet cloak fell in heavy folds to the hem of her short skirt.

After a few minutes of silence she turned to her friend with an unusually quiet expression on her face. Its vivid charm was lost in a look of questioning, thoughtful earnestness.

"Do you think I mean to live at St. Swithin's all the days of my life, Alison?" she asked.

"No! Oh, no," said Alison, quickly; "You are far too adventurous—too free—to imprison yourself in any four walls, Rosamond."

"You often speak as if I were tied to the Fraternity heart and soul."

Alison coloured, always sensitive to the slightest tone of reproach.

"You must forgive me, Rosamond. My own outlook is bounded by Courtley Gardens and I'm afraid I judge others by myself."

"You must be terribly tired of Courtley Gardens, Alison."

"No, that's over. I used to be tired, and discontented, and miserable, but now——" she paused and smiled brightly—"I'm happy."

"Perhaps you'll tell me some day the reason of your sudden happiness, Alison?"

"Perhaps I will."

Her tone was final. Rosamond felt, not for the first time, that Alison was unapproachable when she chose, a stranger in spirit, despite their long and true friendship.

Rosamond changed the subject.

"How do you like Mr. Chichester's little girls?"

"Very well—I haven't thought about them—they are both so like their mother."

"I hope not!" exclaimed Rosamond, so emphatically that Alison looked at her in surprise.

"I mean, I hope Mr. Chichester didn't neglect their mother as he neglects Tiny and Tot. I hope he didn't make *her* shy and stupid. I hope——"

Rosamond's hopes stopped abruptly. She saw the artist approaching with another man.

"Who is that, Alison? I don't want any visitor to spoil our day," she said.

"It's Wilbur Rathbone," returned Alison.

Rosamond sprang up to meet their host. He thought how beautiful she looked in her russet cloak and golden dress. How good it was of her to have given him a whole day! Dear little Alison Booker must have persuaded her to come.

"I'm sorry to have left you alone so long," said Chichester; "I was obliged to see a man on business, as he had motored down from London to have a talk with me. I'm going to paint his wife. Rathbone has just come. Are you not cold in this sudden wind——" he looked anxiously at Rosamond—"Shall we go into the house? There's a grand fire of cherry wood. You'll like it."

Rathbone had shaken hands with the two girls as Chichester spoke. He walked beside Alison, adapting his long stride to her shorter steps. They followed the others more slowly to the house. Sudden pleasure shone in her eyes, for she had not expected this meeting.

"How long it is since we saw each other!" Alison exclaimed, not in her usual calm voice, but frankly, unreservedly, sure of a kind response.

"I've been away from town for a couple of weeks, and last time you called at the office I was working too hard to see anybody," he replied.

"You had a pleasant holiday?" asked Alison.

"No, I didn't," he said, coolly; "But it does one a world of good to get his holidays over. I shall not be obliged to take another until August."

"Did you go far away?"

"Yes, a long journey to a little place in Herts. I spent my time very unprofitably in studying its ancient Victorian civilization. Curious and boring!"

"Why did you go there to be bored?" asked Alison, laughing.

He did not answer the question, but ignored it, looking with admiring eyes from the flowering fruit trees to the cloud of daffodils below them. Chichester glanced over his shoulder.

"The orchard promises well for the apple season, doesn't it, Rath?"

"Yes. I was just thinking what a good thing it is that we have apples to turn into blossoms."

"That's reversing the order of Nature, Mr. Rathbone," said Rosamond; "The blossoms are created for the sake of the apples, not the apples for the sake of the blossoms."

"I don't think so," he said, with a smile; "This is the time of the orchard's glory. Summer, Autumn and Winter are only the heralds of Spring and prepare the earth to welcome her."

"Then the bud is more beautiful than the full

blown flower, and promise is greater than fruition?" asked Chichester.

"Quite!"

"An apple is surely more useful than a petal," said Alison, taking one of the pink flowers between her fingers.

"Would you stand for utility, not for beauty?" said Rathbone.

"There is no beauty without utility," said Chichester; "Your argument is not at all original, for it resolves itself into the old commonplace that anticipation is better than realization."

"No, for I say anticipation *is* realization."

"I agree with you," said Alison; "Last Summer we filled our little garden at home with evening primroses. You know how they open at night, shining like yellow lamps. Rosamond would insist upon the fact that the purpose of such loveliness was to attract the night moth, so that he could carry on his necessary work of fertilization. I said it was the other way about, the moth's work is for the purpose of making the flowers beautiful."

"In a word, Miss Booker, which was it—the chicken or the egg?" said Rathbone.

Alison looked at him reproachfully. They walked on.

"Why do you always turn what I say into nonsense?" she asked.

"On the contrary, I began the nonsense myself."

"Then you were not serious in saying that Spring is the orchard's perfect season?"

"No, but if it belonged to me, and I could look at it every day, I don't think I should waste my time calculating the number of prospective apples when I had the blossoms to rejoice me, or think about Spring in the fulness of Autumn."

"Sufficient unto the day is the goodness thereof," quoted Alison.

"Quite! Were I George Chichester I should be

happy if my orchard were fruitless, swept bare of its blossoms by a single wind, if I had seen it for one hour as it looks to-day."

"But what is the use of a fruitless orchard?"

"Use! Use again, Alison! The wind and rain which may rob it of its splendour are beneficent in other ways; the sun that colours every perfumed flower is the same sun which scorches the earth and shrivels the living grass."

"I know that!" she exclaimed; "But if *my* little orchard is utterly ruined, is it any consolation to realize that others are rich in fruit?"

"It is the greatest consolation," said Rathbone.

"Then you believe in being selfless; we are to think it is possible to live in others' happiness, others' success, others' lives?"

"We must all answer that question for ourselves. My own answer is yes, emphatically yes, but hearing an assertion, however sincere, is no evidence of truth until it is realized by oneself. You mustn't take my word for it, Alison."

"You have had a longer experience of life than I, Mr. Rathbone."

"Ah, but we must judge experience, like a great many other things, by its quality, not its quantity."

They had reached the door of Chichester's studio. The artist and Rosamond passed in, but Alison and her companion stopped as of one accord and looked along the path they had walked together from the orchard.

"It is very sad to think of October—no daffodils, no leaves, no blossoms—when one is living in April," said Alison.

"Banish October! Beauty and happiness in the present hour always justify themselves. We have seen the flowers and believed in their promise, even if the fruit is gathered by others, or there is no fruit at all in the little orchard that we call our own . . . how chill the wind blows!—let us go in and rest."

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It was late before Wilbur Rathbone left his friend's house.

Rosamond and Alison did not stop to dinner. He was alone for several hours with Chichester, but they talked very little. There was only one light in the big studio, except the flicker of the fire.

The artist rarely used the rooms his wife had had furnished and decorated to suit her taste. They were exactly as she had left them, not for any reasons of sentiment, for he only thought of "poor Bertha" when one or another of her many relatives sent an affectionate letter to borrow money, or came down to Esher to see the children.

Tiny and Tot were drifting farther and farther away from his daily life. The capable housekeeper was developing into a kind autocrat. It is the danger of great domestic capability. She was fond of the little girls, but more fond of undisputed authority. She liked Mr. Chichester, but was shrewd enough to see that her sovereignty depended on his continued blindness to her power.

The housekeeper objected, as a general principle, to young ladies visiting at Esher, but Miss Booker's meekness and Miss Courtley's deference to her opinion were disarming. Nevertheless, she was glad they did not stop to dinner.

She did not allow the children to go into the studio to bid their father good-night, saying it would disturb the gentlemen, but it was really Mr. Rathbone's interest in Tiny and Tot—he was very good friends with children—that she resented. There was no need to give him an opportunity to "chatter" about them afterwards to Mr. Chichester.

The two men sat in the shadowed silence, each absorbed in his own thoughts.

It was Rathbone who had checked the artist's talk at the beginning of the evening, and Chichester knew him too well to dream of being offended. It was a

long time since he had seen old Rath in such a mood, and it puzzled him a little.

There had been a time—fifteen, twenty years past—when Rathbone's private affairs had coloured his outlook upon life, making him quiet and pessimistic, but that was soon over, for he was a man of wide, impersonal interests with judgment unaffected by his own experiences.

So, when he suddenly rose to his feet and said he must go, Chichester replied simply, as if they had spent the most entertaining of hours together:—

"Sorry to part with you so early, Rath. What's the hurry?"

"You recollect my old habit of prowling about all night, George; I thought I'd got rid of it, but I am suffering from a relapse. I shall probably walk till morning."

"You're always out all night at the *Wire* office. You should make the most of Saturday by getting as much sleep as you can."

"Good advice, but I can't follow it. I can't stand the imprisonment of a house when I'm in this mood."

"No new vexation, I hope, Rath? No change?" asked his friend, kindly, but with a certain hesitation.

"Change?" he repeated, wearily; "I don't think there will be any change till the crack of doom—whatever that means. Good-night. I'll see you again soon."

Chichester took him to the door. Moonlight was flooding over the garden. They both stood still for a minute, enraptured by the beauty of the night. Then Rathbone laid his hand affectionately on the other's shoulder.

"Rosamond Courtley is wholly delightful. Why don't you paint her head on a background of pure gold, George?"

"Would she sit for me?" said Chichester, half smiling.

"Ask her!" said Rathbone, gaily.

"Perhaps I will, some day."

"Soon, George, soon! This Spring—next Spring—don't wait till the Autumn of your days. Farewell!"

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Rathbone walked quickly away, but he hesitated by the gate at the end of the carriage drive, looked back, saw that Chichester had closed the door and the house was already dark. So he turned and made his way to the orchard.

It was mysterious and wan in the beams of the moon, as if all the pink had been drenched out of the blossoms.

Rathbone stood for a while, with his eyes wandering from place to place, as he re-lived the hours of the afternoon.

He thought of Chichester, with his head bent down as he stood by Rosamond Courtley, pondering her quick, gay speeches, answering in a happy vein unknown to his friend in the old days.

He thought of Rosamond herself, handsome and mature—guessing, unlike Chichester, that she was about thirty—and wondered a little to know she was unmarried, glad of it for the artist's sake, but with the certainty that love had played its part in her development. Few men, he believed, could have looked into those dark eyes, and appreciated the warmth and vitality of her nature, unmoved. Rathbone was one of the few, but he admired her all the same.

Then he thought of Alison. Agitating, baffling emotion swept over him for a minute.

He turned away from the orchard and left Chichester's grounds. A short walk along the highroad led him to Esher Common, quiet and lonely at night, with the gleam of a few lamps from distant houses and the empty railway station.

Rathbone followed a narrow, uneven path which straggled from one side to the other, hardly to be

seen among the grass and clumps of low bushes. A fresh, nipping wind had sprung up. He felt cold and desolate.

Alison !

It was strange and disturbing to be haunted by a woman's name, her unseen presence, a sense of her nearness in absence. Rathbone had believed that he would never be troubled again by such a problem as he knew that he must solve.

Scenes and trifling incidents of their friendship came into his mind with extraordinary clearness. He was not, as a rule, a very observant man, but his knowledge of Alison was full and deep.

Her elusive spirit held and drew him to itself, but the tie was so slight, so inexplicable, that he could not understand it.

This girl, he thought, had little beauty, little outward charm. At times she avoided him, at times she had deliberately sought him out. He had never been to her home. They had always met in busy hours at his office. . . .

No, not always. There was a day when he had followed her in Kensington Gardens, from one end of the Flower Path to the other, against his will, resolved not to speak unless she turned to look at him.

He remembered the change in her face when she looked round—at last!—and saw him behind her; their walk to the lovely, murmuring Summerland by the running stream of the Serpentine; the happy ease and confidence of all she said and he replied; the passing of time as lightly as a wind over the grass.

He remembered a long discussion over her book, at another chance meeting on the Embankment between Battersea and Chelsea. How well she wrote, simply, thoughtfully, and how he had laughed at the delicate, fleeting humour of that first little story she had brought to the *Wire* office. (The little story, by the way, which Barrington Chase had failed to comprehend).

Esher Common lay behind, and Rathbone slackened his pace under the branches of a country road, leading to Hampton Court.

An indescribably tender feeling for Alison came over him. He could not say he loved her as men love whose thoughts are turned to gallantry—passion—betrothal—marriage—but he loved her too. It was as if he had found the long lost darling of his youth whom he had forgotten, for she seemed to awaken vague memories of happiness he had never known, aspirations he had never fulfilled.

Alison would have been revealed to him, had he believed in a former life in this world, as one to whom he had been bound by intense sympathy, even more than love, in another existence.

She seemed so near to himself, but not as a sister is near by the tie of blood, or a wife by the tie of marriage; rather as a being who had once shared the vanished joy and sorrow and experience of a different sphere. . . .

Perpetually mingled with these impressions, new and alien to his nature, was the consciousness of the present time, the facts of everyday life, and a troubled sense of responsibility.

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As Rathbone came into the streets he regained his usual trend of thought. There were few people about. Now and then a market cart passed by, the horses taking their own time, the driver half asleep; or an occasional taxi, skidding along with its little flag dipped; or a late reveller, tacking and uncertain of his course; or a strolling constable, absorbed in thought, or thinking of nothing at all; or a couple of women, eagerly talking, clothed in the cheapest finery—so the poor procession of the streets in the small hours of the morning opened to take him in, and he became one of it, with his own business and cares and deadened hopes to belittle life.

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Alison had spoken the truth to Rosamond. She was happy with a quiet intensity of emotion unknown before. To a noble nature which has never spent itself on lesser joys, incapable of easy, light attachments, love is a revelation of the soul.

As women are more direct than men, less subtle in spite of their quicker instincts, she had fully realized her love for Wilbur Rathbone some time before it was suspected by him.

A false idea of love had troubled her in the days of Barrington Chase, even while she idealized and believed in him; it made her fear herself, dimly seeing that their union, if it could have been, would only satisfy one elementary desire—to be first in the world with a man—and that he cared nothing for the woman she knew herself to be.

It was all so different with Rathbone.

He gave her peace of mind and courage of heart. Her work had changed under his influence, gaining strength and buoyancy. In actual number of hours they had been little together, but the dear companionship could not be measured by time.

Alison thought no more of the future than the past. It was strange to her, in after years, to remember how absolutely she had lived in the present hour.

Her love was selfless in its utter dependence on Rathbone. She knew nothing of his inner life, his affairs, his own people. No word of love had ever passed his lips, no deed had shown her his inmost thoughts, but she hoped and believed—humbly, tenderly hoped and believed—that he would love her.

CHAPTER XV

Rathbone will see no more of Alison Booker. Uncle Jonah's washing. Alison goes for a holiday and finds a collaborator. A change at the Fraternity. Alison's coming happiness.

RATHBONE'S walk from Esher to London ended in a strong resolution.

He would see no more of Alison Booker.

It will be remembered that Barrington Chase once came to the same conclusion and kept his word. He succeeded where Rathbone failed. So the history of love repeats itself—with a vital difference.

Alison's illusion of happiness did not alter her outward bearing. She thought that her mother suspected her secret as little as uncle Jonah, for Mrs. Booker never spoke of it.

Years were changing Mrs. Booker. She worked as willingly and cheerfully in the house, but with less of energy and more in silence. Her tightly twisted hair was almost white. She still wore the scanty dresses and cooking aprons that her daughter had once criticized so severely.

Alison was even less at home than when she was free-lancing at the beginning of her career. Strangers who admired her books frequently asked her to visit them; she had joined a women's club and spoke at its debates; fellow writers invited her to their parties; she was a member of several social committees.

Mrs. Booker was always anxious for her to accept

invitations and intensely proud of her success. She put up a shelf beside her bed for Alison's books; there they stood alone in the paper covers of first editions, for Mrs. Booker would allow no other volumes to share their resting place.

Sometimes, when Alison came into the room, she found her mother standing before this shelf, touching them with the tips of her work-worn, slender fingers. Once she saw Mrs. Booker, who thought she was alone, take down the latest novel, open it and yearningly kiss the page where Alison had written her name.

Uncle Jonah bade fair to reach the century, in spite of bronchitis all the Winter and his own expectation of dying six out of seven nights a week.

The old gentleman's eccentricity was relieved, as of old, by unconscious humour. He no longer walked up and down the passage with an open umbrella, or darned woollen socks with coloured thread, but had determined to do his own laundry under a kind, but mistaken, idea that it would save labour in the household.

Jugs of hot water had to be carried upstairs to his room, soap-suds prepared, a tin bath put upon a low table, and then uncle Jonah liked to be left alone to wash.

Although this performance aggravated Alison exceedingly, she could not help laughing on occasion, as she listened with her mother downstairs.

When he was feeling active the work would be finished in an hour or so, and all the articles hung about on chairs and from the mantel-piece to dry, but this end was seldom reached without a series of mishaps, the least being the loss of the soda, and the greatest the over-turning of the bath, when uncle Jonah had to be rescued from the flood and restored to animation by doses of strong tea.

There was only one fault to be found in his washing—nothing was washed, but Mrs. Booker truly said it

gave him a little excitement in life and he never noticed that she did the work over again.

It was no longer necessary for the Bookers to keep lodgers, for Alison's income was increasing every year, and her mother had given up plain sewing for better paid work. She made and embroidered underclothes for a friend who kept a tiny, expensive shop in the West End. Alison smiled a little bitterly to see a garment for which her mother had been paid perhaps five shillings offered for sale at a guinea and a half.

Only people of wide experience with lodgers can appreciate having one's house to himself. It was a happy day when Mrs. Booker and Alison saw their last "let" depart. It reminded Alison of a remark of the grocer's wife at the corner, the woman who had called uncle Jonah the centurion of Courtley Gardens.

The remark was to the effect that the "rich and noble" (so Mrs. Grocer said) miss many of the compensations of the poor for this life's troubles. They never know, frin'stance, what it means to possess a steamer after boiling your potatoes in a small saucepan, or how domestic difficulties are smoothed away by the purchase of a reely good mangle.

Mrs. Booker and Alison agreed, when they talked over their old lodgers, that Mr. and Mrs. Cuff were to be numbered among the best. Although Mrs. Cuff had been depressing, she had never grumbled, and Mr. Cuff had played dominoes with uncle Jonah whenever he was at home in the evening.

Jerry had written a short letter to Alison, announcing that he thought of entering a new, artistic profession, but not telling her that he had already made his first appearance on the stage as Gerado. He had left his old address, near the Slade, and was boarding with friends, a Mr. and Mrs. Edward Valentine.

Alison answered the letter cordially by asking him to supper at Courtley Gardens. Jerry regretted he

could not accept her kind invitation—she was amused at his formality—as he was engaged every evening. Perhaps it would be better, he added, to drop their correspondence for the present, but he looked forward to seeing her again when his professional position was fully assured.

Alison was puzzled, for she was certain that the end of the letter was not composed by Jerry Cuff. Neither the sentiment nor the spelling were characteristic of her affectionate boy. Rosamond laughed and did not share her anxiety.

“One thing Jerry will always be able to do—look after himself,” she said.

Alison dropped the correspondence, as he asked, but sent a note to his mother in the country. Mr. Cuff replied, being a man who not only opened and read letters addressed to his wife, but answered them also if he felt inclined. He said that they were not at liberty to mention Jerry’s present occupation, but he knew Miss Booker would be glad to hear that it would bring his son both fame and a handsome—Mr. Cuff wished to write honorarium, but after several attempts changed it to wage.

Alison was a little hurt at Jerry’s lack of confidence, but she thought of him none the less kindly, and waited with patience to hear of his success in his unknown work. But it was years before she saw, or spoke to him again.

Only once was the silence broken. He sent her a photograph of himself the following Christmas. It was a big head, touched and re-touched by a clever photographer almost out of recognition.

She could see that he had let his hair become rather long, grown a small moustache, and returned to the velvet coat and wide collar of his early days. Jerry was more handsome than ever, there was no doubt about that, but she wished he did not look so affected.

Mrs. Booker called this masterpiece a life-like portrait of a dying duck in a thunderstorm.

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Wilbur Rathbone had written to Alison only three or four times in his life, short letters about the articles she occasionally sent to the *Daily Wire*, so she was not surprised to hear nothing of him for several weeks after their last meeting in Chichester's orchard.

She could readily have made an excuse to call at his office, but she never guessed how he longed to see her, despite his as yet unchanged resolution, and was content to wait for the delight of a summons.

Her work no longer took her near Fleet Street, or it would have been so easy to stroll towards the *Wire* office at the time when he was likely to be going in. Alison rarely confessed, even to herself, how often they had met for a few minutes in this accidental way. But that was when she first knew him, not in the later days of her secret happiness.

April turned to May, but there was no word from Rathbone.

In June she had promised to go to Buckinghamshire with Rosamond Courtley. They were to spend a long holiday together, Alison's first holiday for three years, at Rosamond's home.

The Fraternity was to be closed, but Kate Browning had volunteered to keep the keys and look after the house. It was impolitic to refuse the kind offer of her best weaver, but Rosamond frowned as she accepted, especially when she learned that Fra John Hooper also intended not to leave the neighbourhood of St. Swithin. He and Kate Browning seemed to dread that the venerable saint would lay a curse upon their looms and spinning wheels if they neglected his workshops for a single week.

Alison made up her mind, after much consideration, not to see Rathbone until she returned to London. But she wrote to him. It was only a six line letter, to tell him where she was going. He answered as briefly.

They both spoke of meeting again in July, and Alison never knew how long it had taken him to

decide the question in his own mind. She was living—not in a fool's paradise, but in the heaven of her ignorance, never suspecting there could be any reason for his reluctance to see her. She knew so much of his nature, so little of his life.

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June passed in sunshine.

Alison found the Courtley family very much as Rosamond had described it. Her friend, unlike the majority of people, could judge her own kin without prejudice, neither overrating their good qualities, nor underrating their faults.

All the boys were away from home, except the youngest, and all the girls too, except the oldest.

Mrs. Courtley was as capable as Rosamond, without her initiation; Mr. Courtley was as attractive, without her ambition. They were both as unconventional as any curate and his wife can be without offending higher powers in the person of their vicar.

The boy was a sheer delight to Alison, who found him the very antithesis of the only other boy she had known well, Jerry Cuff, with his frank, honest disposition, good-tempered and gay.

The oldest daughter was not so likeable, being one of those young women who are intemperate in cheerfulness, ready to bear their friends' troubles most courageously, and believing that everything unpleasant that happened to others is a direct dispensation of Providence.

Alison had not forgotten Rosamond's vague account, on the first day they met, of some old letters of the Courtley family in her father's possession. She had said they were written by a Cavalier, but Alison found they belonged to a later period, being dated during the reign of the first George.

Mr. Courtley was only too happy to find the faded papers and decipher them with his visitor's help. The letters were dispatched by Sir Oliver Courtley,

from London, to his newly married wife in the country.

In the letters the young knight discussed the purchase of a big house near Kensington, not a dozen miles, he explained, from the palace of Her late Majesty, Queen Anne. Alison seized upon the word "Kensington." Mr. Courtley was ready to agree with whatever she said, being far more alive to romance than fact.

Of course the big house, said Alison, had stood on the site of the little cluster of streets containing her own Courtley Gardens. No doubt about it, declared her host. So they both set to work to reconstruct the life story of Sir Oliver and Rosamond, his wife.

Alison had often longed for a collaborator, but never expected to find one in an elderly curate who had not written a line of fiction in his life.

The real and imaginary affairs of the eighteenth century Courtley family gave them many happy hours of comradeship, only known to friends absorbed together in creative art.

What did it matter that there was a break in the line of Courtley after the death of the Georgian knight, the name disappearing altogether until the arrival of a man from another part of the country (not a knight, but a shopman) of whom Rosamond's father was a direct descendant?

What did it matter that the landlord of the Bookers' house, in London, asserted that Courtley Gardens had been called Smith Street in its early days, being altered to the well-sounding Courtley, when it was re-built, in remembrance of a winning racehorse?

Alison and her friend the curate ignored all these dry facts and mapped out their romance. It was not written until a couple of years afterwards, when it appeared with great success under the title, "An Old Love Story."

Alison and Rosamond returned to town at the beginning of July.

A wave of deep depression passed over them both when they found themselves in the busy, noisy station at the end of their journey through woods and fields.

It is a feeling well known to Londoners, however dearly they love London, as if the city were a great sea, restless and forlorn, ever calling them back but heedless of their coming.

Alison wended her way to Courtley Gardens. Rosamond went to the Fraternity.

The sign-board of St. Swithin had been newly painted. She disliked the colours, but appreciated the attention. Undoubtedly it was the work of Fra John Hooper.

Mrs. Grain and Miss Stacey were at the door to welcome her, the former thin and weary from a strenuous holiday of simple living under canvas; the latter as bronzed as a Redskin by sun and wind at the East Coast.

Rosamond, with her trunk, a basket of vegetables, bunches of flowers, a box of herbs and a bundle of books, filled the little hall to over-flowing. She turned into the living room, with a feeling of pleasure at its bare walls and wooden furniture, after the ornaments and draperies of her country home.

"All the windows were cleaned this morning," said Lucy Stacey.

"Everything looks so bright and pretty!" said Rosamond.

"Kate Browning is a gorgeous housekeeper, but——" said Miss Stacey.

"She has looked after the place almost as well as you could have done yourself, dear Miss Courtley, but——" and Mrs. Grain stopped dead.

"Well?" said Rosamond.

There was no reply from either of her friends.

"Well?" she repeated; "What is the matter with Kate?"

Mrs. Grain and Miss Stacey exchanged a helpless glance.

"If it was only for her private use of course we should have no right to object," began Mrs. Grain.

"Private use!" interrupted Lucy, scornfully; "You know there are *three* of them!"

"Whatever are you talking about?" cried Rosamond.

"All three treadle and I must confess very good makes," said Mrs. Grain, as if the truth were being wrung out of her.

"Dearest Lucy—explain," begged Rosamond.

"You had better come and see them for yourself," replied Lucy, grimly.

She led the way to the big workroom upstairs. One of the looms had been moved away; the table was covered with odds and ends of material, showy in colour, cheap in texture, in course of cutting and making into blouses; and in a line with the window, in the best light, stood three sewing machines.

Rosamond was speechless. She looked from one to the other of her companions. There was a whole dictionary of indignation in Lucy Stacey's countenance, but Mrs. Grain was too broken—perhaps by the simple life under canvas, perhaps by the sewing machines—to lift her eyes from the floor.

"If Kate Browning wishes to turn the Fraternity of St. Swithin into a second-rate dressmaker's, she will be sadly disappointed," said Rosamond, emphatically, a comma between every word.

"Of course she doesn't wish anything of the kind! She wouldn't dream of it," observed a very cool voice behind them.

Miss Kate Browning, accompanied by Fra John, had come into the house with her latch-key and followed them upstairs unheard.

She advanced to Rosamond quickly and threw her arms round her neck. There was a second's pause, then they kissed and smiled into each others' eyes—

not that they were deceived for a minute as to the challenge and its acceptance, but they both had a sense of humour.

"So glad to have you back again!" exclaimed Kate, while Fra John shook their returned lady by both hands.

"I'm delighted to see you all," responded Rosamond; "But I can't tolerate blouses, shoddy and machine-made."

"Dearest! They shall all be cleared away to-morrow morning!" replied Kate, with decision.

Fra John looked at her and thought:—"What a little angel she is, with her halo of auburn hair!"

Mrs. Grain and Lucy Stacey looked at her and thought:—"She's very sweet-tempered and reasonable after all."

Rosamond looked at her and thought:—"She can't deceive *me* with her mock meekness, the clever little red-head!"

And they were all right in their different opinions of Miss Kate Browning.

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Alison found Courtley Gardens, her own house, her mother, and uncle Jonah just as she had left them. But the old feeling of monotony did not oppress her.

The absence had seemed endless in her longing to return to London and Wilbur Rathbone. She was to go to see him at his office, on the following night. The expectation and the joy gave her beauty and brilliance, unlike herself, or rather the self expressed at last in physical form and colour.

Old uncle Jonah's dimming eyes shone to see her come in with her country flowers. Mrs. Booker could not look away from her girl's face. It was filled with the inner light of deep and tender thoughts, waiting to be spoken to the well-beloved.

She talked long with her mother at night, all of the days in Buckinghamshire, the plot of her

Courtley romance, Rosamond and the Fraternity, but not a word of the morrow.

Alison hoped to dream of Wilbur, for her last conscious thought was of him before she fell asleep, but the hours passed in oblivion.

When she opened her eyes it was broad day, and the spirit of pure joy greeted her on the instant as if it had waited beside her pillow all night.

CHAPTER XVI

Alison at the office of the *Daily Wire*. She goes to see Wilbur Rathbone. What he told her and she replied.

ALISON BOOKER was alone, in Rathbone's room, at the office of the *Daily Wire*.

A clock on the wall told her it was exactly the right time, between half past eight and nine, and she saw by the arrangement of the papers on his desk that his work was already well in hand.

She glanced at the great waste-paper basket, wondering if it were ever emptied, or if there was a hole at the bottom, so that rejected manuscripts and torn letters could drop unceasingly into the earth; at the wearisome tape machine, resting for a little while surrounded by narrow streamers of white paper; at the big, uncurtained windows staring down upon the street; at a set of caricatures of well known politicians cut from a magazine and pinned upon the walls, ugly, ill drawn, but roughly humourous, and all signed with the scrawled name of Gerado; at a pile of new novels, clean and bright in their coloured "jackets," with a piece of paper labelled "Tompkins" thrust between the first and second, meaning that they were to be handed over to Tomkins to be reviewed (a hundred words each); at the photograph of a pretty girl as she appeared at a Covent Garden Ball dressed as the *Daily Wire*; at a dusty framed portrait of Gladstone; at two of Max's latest cartoons—so her glance wandered about the room, and all the time there was the

dull sob-sob-throb-thump of the printing machines below, and the sound of hurrying feet up and down the stairs.

Alison recognized Rathbone's step—she was sure of it—as he came along the little passage towards his room. Another second and she had risen to meet him, her hand was in his, and she felt the old, ever fresh thrill of his touch through all her being.

“When did I see you last—twenty years ago? Strange, for you haven't changed!” he exclaimed, sitting down at his table opposite to her.

“Does it seem so long?” asked Alison, trembling and smiling with happiness.

Looking at her so earnestly, he was unconscious of her changing colour and her eyelids drooping under his long gaze.

“I have so much to tell you,” said Alison, when his glance released her; “It has been a perfect June for me and I—what is the matter? Have you been ill?”

She was moved to these sudden questions by his haggard expression, and yet he had appeared more bright and vigorous when they met than she had ever seen him before.

“No, no,” he answered, quickly; “I am quite well. Forgive me, but I was seized with a sudden idea as I looked at you—a thought——”

He did not finish his broken sentence, but rose and pushed his chair noisily away. Then he crossed the room and stood at the window, his back towards her, looking out, but not into the street, for she could see that his face was upturned.

Alison hesitated for a minute, but she felt intuitively that his strange manner was the result of something she had said, or done, so she went up to him, and, after another pause, laid her hand upon his shoulder. He put up his own to clasp hers, tightly for a few seconds, then he let it go and turned to look at her.

“Do you know how I've waited and longed to have

you back?" said Rathbone, locking his hands behind him and bending his head down to her, but without drawing any closer.

"I too have longed to come back every day, every hour," replied Alison, breathlessly.

She did not turn her eyes away now, but let him see her heart in them in all its simplicity and truth.

They stood immovable, wordless, hanging towards each other. He could almost feel her breath upon his face as it panted through her open lips, like the breath of a hurt child.

One movement, one entreaty, and he knew she would spring to him. He knew she loved him. She loved him devotedly.

The strength of a clean life—his own love of all that was good and beautiful in her—did not fail Rathbone in the hour of ordeal.

The trouble and perplexity slowly clouding the love-light in her eyes filled him with pity and remorse. As he had resolved not to see her again and broken his resolution, so his belief that he could shield her from unhappiness by silence changed into the knowledge that he owed her the truth. It was her right, the only poor return that he could give.

They had both been unconscious of the sounds outside the room, whether in the building itself or the distant road, but a sharp rap at the door recalled them to a sense of the place and time. They started and drew away from each other. Alison sat down again at the table, playing with her gloves, slipping the buttons at her wrists in and out of their little holes.

Rathbone went to the door and spoke to some one outside. They exchanged half a dozen sentences in quick, decisive voices. Then the unseen man went away and Rathbone returned to Alison.

"I must go to the editor at once," he said; "That means I shall have no more time to-night. My dear, how you shake!"—he put his hands over hers upon the table—"Try to be composed, Alison. Stay here

and rest as long as you like. I must see you again—when?”

“To-morrow night?” she asked.

“No. May I come to your house in the afternoon, or would you rather come to me?”

“I don’t know—anywhere you like—I think I would rather come to you,” said Alison.

“Very well. Come to my place. We shan’t be interrupted there. I have so much to say to you. Good-night. Good-bye!”

“Good-bye!”

Alison stayed only a few minutes in Rathbone’s room, after he left her, for she was seized with a wild restlessness. She walked away from the *Wire* office at her quickest pace, turning mechanically in the right direction, but with no definite thought of going home or elsewhere.

Her mind was bewildered for she knew, without words, that Rathbone understood and returned her love. A woman is never deceived in a man’s attitude towards her when they are so attuned to each other. Alison, even in her agitation, responded to his quiet, stronger nature by the successful effort she made to recover her self-possession.

She was sensitive enough to suspect that there was a barrier between them, but she could not believe that it was insurmountable. Wilbur would thrust it away.

Alison was still too young to realize, in her inmost heart, that destiny is inexorable, or to think that happiness may not be, after all, the purpose and triumph of life.

* * * * *

A day and night had never passed so slowly as the time between her parting and meeting again with Rathbone.

She had not been before to his flat in Margaret Chambers. It was at the top of an old-fashioned

house, up many stairs. Alison rested at the third landing and gazed abstractedly out of a dingy window on to a small yard, surrounded by the high walls of neighbouring offices, where she saw girls and young men at work.

The thought passed through her mind :—" In what mood shall I look out of this window as I go away ? Will life be very different to me by then ? "

There was an old brass knocker representing a clenched fist on Rathbone's door. He admitted her himself, for he was alone in the flat, into a slip of a hall leading by three steps into his principal room.

They shook hands, but neither of them made any awkward attempts to talk commonplaces. It was as if they had left each other only a few minutes past.

Alison hardly glanced round the room, but she had the impression that it was square and low ceilinged, green and brown in general effect, with many books and a few engravings. On a round table in the centre was a vase containing a handful of long-stemmed pink roses. She felt, rather than smelt, their perfume in the air, for the windows were open to the hot July sunshine.

Rathbone's dog, an Irish terrier, came forward doubtfully to meet her, and she laid her hand on his head.

" Lie down, Mike ! " his master said, and the dog obeyed, choosing a spot close to the guest's feet.

Alison leaned back in her chair, in the pleasant shadows of a blind drawn down over the window. She unfastened the clasp of her Summer cloak. Rathbone stepped forward quickly to take it off for her.

As he touched her shoulders she felt him pause. She turned her head and they looked at each other. Alison read the question that flashed into his eyes and instantly raised her face to meet his kiss.

Rathbone bent down, but his expression suddenly

changed. He spoke softly, brokenly, in a voice unlike his own, his lips close to her cheek.

"Oh, Alison! It can't be—God forgive me—it can't be—my poor child—I am married——"

Alison's heart seemed to leap into her throat, throbbing, then she felt as if its pulse were slowly dying out—slowly—slowly——

Rathbone knelt down beside her chair and held her in his arms. She was conscious of absolute rest and the deepest sense of sorrow, but not for herself alone—for all humanity. It was as if she felt, for the first time, the unspeakable compassion of the soul for the pain and grief of life.

His words had dealt a terrible wound, but she was too stunned to realize their full meaning. The recurring thought—I am here and he loves me!—was fraught with wonder and joy. But at the same time, the pity of it! The pity of loving so much and loving too late. Too late.

* * * * *

Rathbone was pacing up and down the room. Alison stayed as he had left her, fallen back in her chair, pale and stricken. Few words had passed between them so far. They both felt, for a while, that all was said. All was told.

Alison followed Rathbone with her eyes, tenderly, longing to console him, but helpless in her own misery.

He sat down beside her, at last, stooping forward, his hands clasped between his knees.

"What shall I tell you, Alison? Everything?" he said, simply, a long pause between the two questions.

"Tell me as much or as little as you will," she answered; "I suppose I have no right to ask——"

"Alison! Alison!"

"We know but little of each other, you and I. But I thought you cared for me so much. . . ."

He did not take her hands again, but he bent down and crushed his lips upon them.

"I was married over twenty years ago," said Rathbone, slowly, carefully choosing his words; "There is no romance or tragedy in the story of my life, Alison, as the world understands romance and tragedy. Neither is it sensational nor sordid. My wife——"

He stopped and turned his eyes away, with a look upon his face which sorely puzzled her. There was irony in it, and bitterness, and self-contempt.

"My wife is not insane nor unfaithful. There is no ordinary, stage-play problem for us to solve. I could not divorce her, even if I chose, nor could she divorce me as the law now stands. We have long been separated by mutual consent, but never formally with the approval, or disapproval, of her people. I speak of her people because she lives with her father and sisters to whom she is devoted."

Alison watched him with amazement. He did not look or speak like the man she knew. He was very hard, or curbing a passion long repressed.

"We were married when I was not very young. My wife is several years older. We had been engaged for a long time, but seen very little of each other. Her whole life had been spent in her own little town in Herts—yes, I had been staying there when I met you once at George Chichester's house," he broke off to answer her unspoken question; "It is my wife's wish that I should visit her family now and again. The idea is to show her friends that I am a constant, if not an attentive, husband. There is little enough that I can do for her, and so—— Alison! I am absolutely indifferent to this woman; she is absolutely indifferent to me, but we were man and wife for two years—no more—and there has been no unforgivable fault on her side or mine."

"Perhaps, some day, you will be happy with her again," murmured Alison.

"Never in this life, my dear, and if there is another, I pray to God——" he stopped and shook his head with an inscrutable smile—"Can I make you understand our attitude to each other? There is no tragedy about it, as I told you before, and no romance. *It is deadly, dull boredom.* We both agree to that. I believe it is the only subject on which we do agree.

"Our parting was not sudden or definite; it began by long visits to her people, and it has ended with satisfaction to us both. We meet officially every few years. We never think about each other. We never write to each other——" he paused again and laughed—"She sends me a card at Christmas; it is generally a picture of a robin, or a church in the snow, or a sprig of holly. Every time I wonder from whom it comes, for there is no message, until I see the post-mark. I suppose it is hoped by the family that my worldly heart may be regenerated some day by recollections of the church, or the robin, or the holly, but I doubt it."

Rathbone had recovered his usual manner, but he did not look at Alison as he went on speaking.

"When I first met you, dear, I only looked forward to the possibility of friendship. For all I knew, you were engaged to be married, or you had not met the man whom you could honour with your love. I swear to you there was no selfish thought in my desire to know you better. I had great faith in your work. I have long regarded myself as too old—in feeling, though not in years—and too indifferent to appeal to any woman. What have you done to me, Alison, that I am shaken out of my lethargy, roused to action, touched to the quick—stabbed and bleeding——"

The air seemed to grow still. Alison trembled from head to foot at the low vehemence of his voice. She rose to her feet and moved away, her hands outstretched to warn him off, but without fear or anger;

her eyes were luminous with the light of love and trust.

"Alison!" said Rathbone, hoarsely; "What are we to do? You know that I love you, I love you, I love you! If you will come to me of your own free choice I promise you, upon my soul, to be faithful and loyal. I will shield and defend you all the days of my life. Before God, I will! But I lay the decision in your hands. You are the woman and you must choose. I am not the man to take you against your will. Choose! I love you. If you are mine at all, you must be mine utterly. I love—I love—but there is no cruelty of passion in my heart for you—no, my darling, no, no, no!"

He took one step towards her. He touched her hands and raised them to his face. He laid them back upon her breast. Then he stood immovable, waiting.

The depth and solemnity of his words filled Alison with a pride and exaltation she had never known—she was never to know again. They had an extraordinary effect upon her. She was suddenly calm, steadfast, resolved.

All her past life, and what she knew of his, flashed through her brain as if it were the minute of death in the midst of life.

She thought of the one being in the world who was nearer than all others, the mother who had borne her. She thought of her father's honourable name. She thought of other women who had been strong in temptation. She thought of the dead. She thought of the unborn—

"I cannot be your wife. I couldn't bear—oh, I couldn't bear—to be less than your wife."

Alison covered her face with her hands and they were all wet with her blinding tears.

"I don't know whether it is courage, or cowardice," she said; "But I couldn't be happy with you unless we were married. I care for you too much. I have

always thought so seriously of marriage. It is more than mere convention. God should be the witness of it, and how can I call upon Him if I take the husband of another woman. How can I pray to God if I brand myself and the man I love——”

She could say no more, but throwing herself into a chair by the table, she rested both elbows on it and cried and cried.

Rathbone stood still and watched her, in silence. The fire which had flamed in his heart burnt out. He was lost in a great remorse. She had been so earnest and happy in the Spring-time when he saw her and loved her, in the blossoming orchard. She was so dear, and sweet, and innocent.

After a long while Alison raised her head. A little clock on his desk had chimed the hour of their parting.

“I must go away,” she said, dully; “Will you make me a promise before I go, Wilbur? Do you know, I have never called you by your name?”

“I will promise anything you ask, Alison.”

“Then, I don’t want you to write to me, or talk to me if we meet. It’s impossible—impossible for us to know each other on the old terms. Surely you feel that?”

There was a long pause.

“Yes, you are right,” he said.

“I am not likely to see you, for I won’t call at the *Wire* office again, and I very rarely go to the house of your friend, George Chichester.”

“Will it make you happier not to see me?”

“Happier?” she repeated, in a voice of infinite sadness; “No, it won’t be happier for me, but it will be easier. Promise, Wilbur, promise!”

“I promise. From to-day we are strangers, but never forget that in my heart I shall always be to you as I am now.”

“Always? I wonder——”

She took up her cloak, the pretty cloak she had put

on for the first time, and, standing between the windows, looked at her surroundings long and steadily.

"Isn't it strange, you have never been to our house, and this is the first, last time I shall see you in your lonely home. I must remember all I can."

She drew her forehead into lines of frowning attention, as if she were trying to photograph the room upon her brain.

"There is your writing desk. Do you often work at home? I can only see one portrait. It is a beautiful face. Is it a miniature of your mother?"

"Yes. She died when I was a boy. I have no picture of my father. He also died when I was very young."

"No brothers or sisters?"

"No kith or kin in the world. I am all alone."

She moved to the mantelpiece, touching a few things caressingly with the tips of her fingers; then from one window to the other, looking out; then to a big chair, with a book-rest screwed to one of the arms.

"I shall often think of you sitting here, reading. Lay down your book now and then, Wilbur, and remember me. Remember me!"

"Yes—yes—my darling——"

He turned away from her abruptly and put his right hand over his face.

Alison made a quick gesture, as if she would have gone to him, but checked herself, and spoke very gently.

"I must go. Indeed I must go. Don't be unhappy. You have been so kind and considerate to me. I shall always be grateful. Don't come downstairs with me. Don't, Wilbur! Good-bye!"

He did not move, but stood in the same position, still covering his eyes.

Alison crept from the room, softly, slowly, as if there were some one asleep, or dead, she was leaving

behind . . . down the three steps . . . out at the door . . . she held it open, listening.

He followed her. She heard his sudden, quick tread and he came, holding out the roses.

"I bought these for you. Will you take them? Good-bye!"

As their hands touched he drew her within his arm and looked down into her face.

"Alison, must you go?"

She knew what he meant—the vital, last appeal behind the simple question.

"*Alison! Must you go?*"

"*Yes.*"

Still looking intently into her eyes, Rathbone held her without speaking for a full minute. Then he kissed her; she kissed him; and so they parted.

He lifted his hand to her as she looked back, but closed the door immediately afterwards.

Alison went down the long stairway into the crowded streets. She neither regretted, nor was she glad to think of her decision. It was irrevocable.

The sun was setting. The long night stretched before her, with the long years beyond.

CHAPTER XVII

Three years after Jerry Cuff's first appearance on the stage. How Blond Valentine posed for Jerry and gave him a lecture afterwards.

IT is a far cry from Alison Booker and Rathbone to Jerry Cuff.

Jerry had celebrated three anniversaries of his first appearance on the stage. He still called himself Gerado, having added the words "Lightning Artist" in posters and programmes.

His style and appearance had become flamboyant, partly from taste, partly for advertisement.

All Gerado's sketches on the stage were drawn in rough coloured chalks on very big sheets of paper. He had had his easel painted red. There were flaring red cushions for the chairs, and a couple of high screens for background, with green dragons on gold. He wore a fancy suit of purple velvet, with lace ruffles, buckled shoes, and a soft, wide-brimmed hat. This costume, as everybody knows, is typical of a French art student.

Valentine and Orson, his first friends in the show world, were proud of Jerry's success, but the latter considered that his turn erred on the side of over-refinement. Orson had not a high opinion of the public.

"They don't want singing in the halls, they want screeching, and they don't want pictures, but daubs,"

he said; "Don't they laugh at the same old rotten 'gags' night after night, year after year?"

Jerry lived with Mr. and Mrs. Valentine, Mrs. Dobson, and Master Valentine. Their house was in Kilburn. The rooms were as crowded with handsome furniture as the showroom of a shop in Tottenham Court Road, and the garden in Summertime was a blooming mass, as Mrs. Dobson said, of geraniums, calceolarias, lobelias, rambler roses, and other vivid flowers.

Valentine's only hobbies were gardening and house decoration. He could hang paper, whitewash ceilings, and do plumbing and carpentry jobs as well, and more quickly, than any local workman.

Jerry on the contrary was as useless—to quote Mrs. Dobson again—as only a lazy chap can be. In his private opinion the household could have done very well without his friend's mother-in-law and three-year-old boy.

Valentine's wife was another matter. Jerry liked and admired her perhaps a little too much. She was pretty and pert, looked much younger than her twenty-five years, and dressed extravagantly.

Jerry chose to believe that Blond (Mrs. Valentine's pet name) had been forced by Mrs. Dobson to marry little Ned Valentine for his money. He saw she was on affectionate terms with her husband, but that only proved the sweetness of her self-sacrificing nature.

Jerry had always been sentimental, as his early love for Rosamond Courtley had shown. He remembered reading, in some book or magazine, a description of tragedies behind the scenes of theatres, in which the author made the old remark about the indifference of an audience to breaking hearts behind smiling faces. He thought it applied to Mrs. Valentine, for she laughed a great deal, and a heart secretly breaking was the only way to account for her high spirits.

Master Valentine might have been a Duggleby by

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his precocious interest in acrobatic training. He could turn somersaults beyond his years, as his grandmother proudly declared, and had to be checked in his desire to stand upon his head almost before he could manage to stand upon his feet.

Jerry had not given up the idea of making sketches, at the end of his turn, of members of the audience, but Mrs. Valentine was his only professional friend who approved of the notion. Blond was daring and original. She and Jerry discussed the possibilities from every standpoint.

"There's one thing dead against the 'act,' my boy," said Valentine; "You'll never get a woman to march on to the stage from the front, and a new stunt won't go for nuts unless the ladies like it."

"I'm sure you're wrong, Ned," put in Mrs. Valentine; "if only one woman has the pluck to lead the way there'll be any number ready to follow her."

"Would you have the pluck to do it yourself, Blond?" asked her husband.

"Well, of all the silly questions! Wasn't I on the stage from my fifteenth birthday till I married you?" cried Blond.

"Bliss and rapture ever since!" said Valentine, squinting and ogling—Jerry could not understand how she tolerated the little fool—"But it's a different thing, my girl, to get up from your seat and walk through the crowd, with everybody grinning at you."

"I'll do it with pleasure," said Blond, "if Jerry wants to give it a trial."

"Are you serious?" asked Jerry.

"Of course! I'm always willing to help a pal, aren't I, Ned?"

"You're the best little pal yourself that a man ever had!" returned her husband, pinching her ear as he passed her on his way to the door.

She was left alone with Jerry. It was on the tip of his tongue to criticize Valentine's roughness, for she had given a little scream and rubbed her ear, but

he changed his mind. Blond had told him, more than once, that she did not care about talking of her husband.

* * * * *

On the following night Gerado tried his new experiment.

He made a neat little speech, offering to take half-a-dozen lightning portraits of members of the audience, if three ladies and three gentlemen would be kind enough to pose for him. There would be no difficulty in reaching the stage, he pointed out, as a little platform and steps had been arranged beforehand.

The invitation was not accepted with alacrity. A man in the gallery whistled, but someone at the back of the pit said in a loud voice :—

“ You go on, George ! ”

Jerry pattered for a few seconds, as he had learned to do with great ease, and entreated the unseen George not to disappoint his friends.

“ Go on, George ! ”

“ Go on yerself ! ”

“ I will if you will, George.”

“ All right.”

“ Then come on, George ! ”

So George and his companion came on, awkwardly enough, to the satisfaction of Gerado and the audience. Their courage fired a very stout gentleman, smoking a cigar, to make a third, to the great pride of the party he had left in the stalls, to whom he waved with his programme from behind the footlights.

Then Gerado, in a most ingratiating manner, called upon the ladies, but the ladies did not respond. He begged for three—for two—for one !

Mrs. Valentine lifted her gloved hand in answer, laughed prettily at a girl who was sitting beside her, and advanced to the stage with a capital assumption of becoming shyness.

Jerry squeezed her fingers as he helped her to mount the steps. She was fashionably dressed, with tippity-tilt heels, and a beautiful bunch of pink carnations tucked into her belt. Gerado had given them to her as they drove from Kilburn together.

George, his friend, the stout gentleman, and Blond Valentine were given chairs. Jerry stood with his easel profile to the audience, so that a sketch could not be seen until it was finished. He talked while he worked, not very well, for he was slightly nervous.

He hastily decided to make an absurd caricature of the unlucky George, whom he judged to be too slow and good-tempered to resent it, and placate his friend by a good sketch, while it would be necessary to reduce the stout gentleman enough to please his party in the stalls, but not enough to amuse the audience. A nice distinction.

The portraits were poor and faulty, but so quickly dashed upon paper that Jerry was rewarded with loud applause.

When he came to Mrs. Valentine there was a change in his look and manner. He was obliged to leave off pattering, for he meant to pay her the compliment of doing his best.

How pretty she looked, just enough "made up" for the garish lights, with her yellow hair gleaming under the brim of her white hat; with her short upper lip, and her mischievous eyes, their brightness hidden beneath demure, drooping lids.

Gerado asked her to look at him. She obeyed bashfully and he thought he had never seen anything so bewitching as her expression of mock gravity. He ventured to murmur her name. She touched the carnations carelessly. It was the most delicious, intimate, secret flirting.

The portrait was charming. Jerry held it up proudly for the audience to see. He felt unusual fatigue, for he had been obliged to concentrate on his work in a way that he had never done before. He was pale under his grease paint.

Blond Valentine gave him a swift look of sympathy as they bowed ceremoniously to each other before she left the stage for her seat in the stalls. It flattered and excited him. He pressed his hand to his forehead and half closed his eyes, with partly real, partly assumed, exhaustion.

Half an hour later they met outside the stage door. Jerry had completely recovered. He had been drinking with several acquaintances, and, although he was sober, his companion's sharp eyes perceived a change in him.

He greeted her a little too effusively and helped her into his cab with unnecessary solicitude. She felt his arm round her waist for a second and he called her "dear."

As they drove away Jerry began to boast, hardly waiting for her congratulations. He had made the hit of his life! He meant to ask double his present salary on every fresh contract. He must get out some new printing. He abused the wretched little suburban halls. His agents must arrange for a West End appearance. He would go and see the fellows about it to-morrow morning.

Blond Valentine smoked a scented cigarette, leaning back in her corner, and watched him, her pretty face thoughtful and shrewd.

Suddenly Jerry stopped and threw the end of his own cigarette out of the window—he had forgotten the days when he never wasted a fag—and began to compliment her on her courage in helping him.

He told her she was sweet, adorable, and all the men in the hall had been frantically jealous of him. She had looked so pretty, posing on the stage, that Jerry declared he could hardly finish his drawing. He had always admired her, but to-night she had driven him crazy. When she had touched the carnations he nearly gave himself away—nearly showed the audience how much they were to each other—by catching her up in his arms and kissing her.

"I stopped myself just in time!" exclaimed Jerry; "But if it hadn't been that my whole career depends upon this wonderful new turn, I swear I couldn't have resisted the temptation. Blond! We're not on the stage now. Dear little Blond! Won't you fondle the carnations again and let me show you how I felt—do, Blond—only once——"

Mrs. Valentine, as he tried to clasp her in his arms, snatched his flowers out of her belt and threw them, as decidedly and deliberately as Jerry had tossed away his cigarette, out of the carriage window. He stopped short, staring at her.

"I say, Blond! You didn't mean to do that?" he cried, incredulously; "What was it for?"

"Just to give you a hint, young man," replied Blond.

"D'you think I'm going to take it?" he asked, seizing her left hand and holding it forcibly.

"If you don't, I shall shout to the driver to stop and I shall get out of the cab," said she; "You're behaving like a fool, Jerry. Let me go now! You're hurting me. Let me go! Let me go or I'll tell——"

"Valentine?" interrupted Jerry, with a laugh; "I'm not afraid of the poor little chap——"

"No!" interrupted Blond in her turn; "I wouldn't bother Ned by repeating your sauce. No! I'll tell my mother and she'll give you a lick of the rough side of her tongue."

Blond got possession of her hand and Jerry looked extremely silly.

It might be daring and reckless to risk discovery by her husband, but to face the indignation of the voluble Mrs. Dobson was a very different matter. He looked at Blond far from amiably. She laughed and made an imperious little gesture for him to squeeze into his corner of the seat.

"I can't help admiring you, you heartless little flirt!" he said.

"You can do that as much as you jolly well please, but—keep off the grass," responded Mrs. Valentine.

"That's a woman all over!" cried Jerry; "She leads a man on and then pretends to be offended at nothing."

Blond looked indifferently out of the window and made no answer.

"You knew very well that you were driving me crazy, as I told you before," he continued, regaining his self-possession; "You offered to come and sit for me on the stage to-night. You meant to go home with me alone. You know how pretty you are, adorably pretty——"

"Oh, shut up!" exclaimed Blond; "I've had enough of your nonsense to last. Look here, Jerry! I've always thought you were a particularly straight, honest boy. I knew you liked me. Why not? Lots of fellows like me. But I gave you credit for more sense than to think I was captivated by you. *You!*" she repeated, scornfully; "D'you imagine because you've got a pair of china blue eyes, and long legs, that every woman you grin at is going to fall in love with your beauty? You're very much mistaken, my son. At all events, I shouldn't, even if I wasn't married to one of the best. You're far too conceited and idle and selfish. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

Jerry began to feel very uncomfortable, for Blond spoke with an emphasis and expression that drove her words home.

"I hate slanging anybody, but you've got yourself to thank," she went on—there was a touch of Mrs. Dobson in Blond—"You said just now I pretended to be angry at nothing. For shame, Jerry Cuff! Would you have talked to me like you did, or tried to kiss me against my will, if Ned had been here? Ah! I'm glad to see you colour up like fire. You can't get away from that. I'm speaking of Ned Valentine, who first advised you to go on the stage,

got you a trial turn, lent you money, and has taken you to live in his own house. Remember all that. It'll do you good."

Jerry did not say a word. Blond looked at him steadily for a minute, then turned again to the window. They went on in silence for some time.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" asked Blond, suddenly.

"Nothing!" said Jerry, with an effort; "I'm—I'm sorry, Blond. I—I—beg your pardon."

"Granted. But look here! I don't want to have any more talk to-morrow, or any time, on this subject. Never mention it to me again. You're the kind of man to enjoy being miserable and repentant, and, if you don't take care, you'll get maudlin. I know your sort!"

"Upon my soul, you haven't spared me, Blond!" exclaimed Jerry.

"All for your own good. You'll find plenty of girls ready to flatter you. I've never believed in spoiling a man, or tried to do it, except my old Ned, and he's too good to be spoilt."

She was silent again for a few minutes, then she laid her hand on her companion's arm.

"Come, Jerry, don't be down in the mouth because you've heard a few home truths. I'm none the less of a pal for having spoken them. You can rely on me and Ned all your life. We never turn on our old friends."

A memory of the past shot through Jerry's mind as he looked at her.

Rosamond Courtley, his first love, would never have spoken to him with the bluntness of this woman, nor would Alison Booker, but he had the sense to know that Blond, meeting him at one of the cross-roads of his life, had had the courage to give him a telling kick in the right direction. He was sore and ashamed, but in his inmost heart he was grateful.

Good luck has much to do with the success of an artist like Jerry Cuff.

His idea of sketching members of his audience "caught on," in the slang of the halls, and happened to attract the attention of the friend of a critic on the *Daily Wire*. The friend had posed for him, being so impressed by his clever sketch that he carried it about in his pocket to be unfolded and shown on all occasions. The critic laughed at the other man's exaggerated opinion of Gerado's talent, but went to see his turn.

A good notice in the *Wire* followed. Jerry's photograph appeared in an illustrated weekly paper. People began to talk about him. He had made a success with a touch of originality and it grew surely, but slowly.

He left the Valentine's house, after living with them for a year. Jerry was tired of Kilburn, and Blond wanted to use his room as a nursery for her little boy. They parted on the most friendly terms.

"There's always a knife and fork for you at our table, Jerry," said Valentine, shaking his comrade's hand over and over again; "Come and take pot luck with us whenever you can. You shall never have a slice of humble pie in this house, old sport, or a cut from the cold shoulder. If you don't see what you like in the window, don't be afraid to ask for it."

Jerry thanked him warmly, without looking at Blond, who probably remembered as well as he did an occasion when she had helped him to both the pie and the shoulder.

"We shan't see much of Jerry Cuff in the future," she observed, when his taxi had disappeared round the corner of the street.

"Don't you think so, m' dear?" asked her husband; "I'm sure I gave him a most cordial invite, so did you and the Mummy."

"I know that, Ned, but our Jerry will have to change his hatter before he cares to visit us."

"What d'you mean, Blond?"

"Because his head is swollen."

"He's got too big for his boots, eh?" queried Valentine, transferring the effect of Jerry's conceit to the other end of him; then he added, thoughtfully:—"P'raps you're right. Jerry's going to earn big money some day. The screw that he's getting now isn't to be sneezed at."

Little Ned Valentine stared down the street again, as if he could see the taxi. Then he took his wife's arm and they went into the house.

"No, Jerry's screw is not to be sneezed at!" he repeated, solemnly.

There is no reason why anybody's salary should need to be sneezed at, but Valentine was emphatic on the point regarding Gerado's earnings.

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Jerry had engaged two rooms at a private hotel in his old neighbourhood of Bloomsbury. He wished to entertain his friends in a way which had not been possible at Kilburn.

Old Ned had been a good host and Blond was always captivating, but he could not endure the talkative Mrs. Dobson, in cerise satin and heavy jewels, or Master Valentine's playful imitation of his father's stage feats.

Jerry's friends were a medley of music hall performers, art students, and young men and women who were undecided as to the professions in which they would become famous and wealthy. His society, rather like Jerry himself, was not quite Bohemian and not quite conventional—say a papier-maché society, a very good imitation up to a certain point, but not to be mistaken for the genuine article.

He did not forget his own people. Mr. and Mrs. Cuff paid him short, frequent visits, when he took them about London in a kind, patronizing manner, as if they had never been there before.

Jerry seemed to consider it a filial duty to show his parents the Tower, the tombs at Westminster, the Zoological Gardens, and other interesting, but fatiguing public sights.

It was really pathetic to see Mrs. Cuff "enjoying herself" at the Geological Museum, for instance, or fagging to the top of the Monument, with her husband adjuring her all the time, as in the old days at Courtley Gardens, to go easy and remember 'er 'eart.

Jerry took them to lunches and dinners at expensive restaurants, where Mr. Cuff was an unconscionable time reading the menu, but generally disappointed his son by ordering roast mutton and boiled potatoes after all. Mrs. Cuff was depressed by the waste, and thanked heaven, in the hearing of the waiter, that she was not required to wash up.

Jerry meant well, and his parents were proud of him, but if the visits were not altogether a success he failed entirely to see that it was his fault.

In one particular he was vastly improved, partly owing to Blond Valentine's influence, partly to his own shrewdness. He was perpetually trying to improve his turn.

The speed with which he could sketch, combined with the decision of his touch, meant a severe training of hand and eye. If his humour had only been more genial, he would have gone far. But that was not to be. Jerry found what he sought in humanity, the disproportionate and the ugly.

If he occasionally surprised his audiences into a few minutes of higher pleasure by kindly jest or refined thought, it appeared to be solely the result of accident. The sketches which followed were invariably coarse or stupid.

CHAPTER XVIII

Seven years after Jerry's first appearance. The Paramount Theatre. Mrs. Tuck's opinion of Gerado. Alison and Jerry meet again. Home.

JERRY CUFF was performing at the Paramount Theatre. It was not only the highest paid engagement he had ever had, but he had reached the summit of his ambition.

Seven years had passed since he had made his first appearance on the stage.

The Paramount was a big house, popular and well managed. The name of Gerado appeared in a good place on the programme. The best seats were not filled at the beginning of the evening, but by the time he came on there were no empty places, and a line of men lounged behind the red cord festooned along the length of the stalls.

Jerry had improved upon the screens he formerly used as a background in small halls, for he had been able to afford a studio scene, with a throne for his models, showy furniture, flowers, and bright draperies.

His easel was painted black, no longer red, and he made his appearance in a white linen suit, with a broad, purple and green striped belt.

Jerry had long ceased to be nervous behind the footlights. His walk, bow and smile expressed absolute self-confidence. He began to make dashes and scrawls upon the wide sheet of paper with apparent

recklessness, having added to the effectiveness of the drawings by doing them upside down, so that they came as a surprise when he suddenly turned them over. The patter which had helped him so much in the old days was considered old-fashioned at the Paramount, so he was gradually giving it up.

The best conjurors, auctioneers, and lightning artists leave patter to their inferiors.

Jerry had quick eyes. One glance at the boxes, as he made his bow, evidently interested him so much in a party of three, on the dress circle tier to the left, that he looked towards that spot again and again.

There were two ladies and a man in the box. One of the ladies was conspicuous on account of her scarlet hat, with a quantity of red currants, say about a pound and a half, on one side, and a handful of prize cherries on the other. She seemed to have spent all her strength upon the hat, for her dress was indefinite in style and drab in colour.

The man was taking the performance stolidly, rarely smiling or applauding, but with a look on his face of British determination to see it through.

It was the second woman who had attracted Gerado's attention. She was leaning forward on the edge of the box, her face shaded by a grey hat, but he could see her plainly.

He was instantly struck by her likeness to someone he knew—who was it? This was not a very young woman, but she made him think of a girl. Rosamond Courtley? Why should Rosamond Courtley flash into his mind? It was years since he had seen her. No, that was not Rosamond. Her dark eyes and flashing beauty could never have become so staid and ordinary——

Alison Booker! Of course she reminded him of Alison Booker. At the first opportunity he glanced at her again. Then he was certain. The lady in the grey hat made him think of his old friend Alison for the best of all reasons—it was Alison herself.

Jerry hoped she would be one who accepted his invitation to be sketched on the stage, but he only succeeded in getting one woman to pose that night, a handsome young Jewess who did not appeal to him in the least.

"Do you think he knows you, Ally dear?" asked Mrs. Tuck, in a whisper.

Alison was sharing the box with her old colleague on the *Arrow*, squired by Mr. Tuck.

"I believe he recognizes me, but I'm not sure," replied Alison; "Jerry smiles as if he knew everybody in the house."

"He has a beautiful smile!" exclaimed Mrs. Tuck, enthusiastically; "I never saw a young man of greater personal attraction. Such waves of brown hair, such tender, world-weary eyes, such a strong chin, and square, powerful jaw!"

It was not at all a good description of Jerry, whose jaw and chin were his weak points, but Mrs. Tuck often talked in the style of her serial stories.

"His performance is really very fine and instructive," she continued; "It's the kind of thing to induce people to take an interest in real pictures. I mean people in the gallery and the pit, who have had no opportunity to study drawing. It lifts one into a higher atmosphere, turning a music hall into a temple of Art, although perhaps his designs are a *little* too bold—what do you say, James dear?"

"To be sure!" replied James, who was a man of few words.

Alison did not listen attentively to Mrs. Tuck. She was absorbed in watching Jerry.

He had finished the portrait sketches and the sitters had left the stage. It was plainly the end of his turn, but he suddenly determined to make one more drawing.

He moved the easel into a position which prevented the people on his left side, where Alison was sitting, from watching the picture grow.

In less than two minutes it was done. He lifted the board from the easel and held it up for all to see. There was a general laugh. He had limned a great, grotesque portrait of old uncle Jonah, wearing the top hat of bygone days when first the Cuffs lodged in Mrs. Booker's house. It reminded Alison instantly of the sketch Jerry had made on the occasion when she first discovered he was a street artist.

He turned to Mrs. Tuck's box and bowed low as the velvet curtains swung together, hiding him from view. Alison laughed heartily and applauded. She had been offended at the street sketch, years before, but now she was able to appreciate the joke.

"Won't you go round to the stage door and see Gerado?" asked Mrs. Tuck, at the end of the programme; "James and I will wait for you with pleasure."

"I expect he goes away directly after his turn," replied Alison; "I will write a note to him tomorrow."

Mrs. Tuck talked about Gerado's genius and inspiration, not forgetting his fine eyes and chin, all the way from Piccadilly to West Kensington. The Tucks had recently taken a house near Courtley Gardens.

Mrs. Tuck had renewed her friendship with Miss Booker in a most affectionate manner, partly on account of her own cordiality and partly in consequence of Alison's success. There was no jealousy in Mrs. Tuck's disposition. She intended to write beautiful and original novels herself when she had made her fortune with serials, being firmly persuaded that leisure, a pen, ink, and sufficient scribbling paper were the only things needful.

She and her husband got out of the taxi at their own door.

"You look so weary, Ally dear," said Mrs. Tuck, kissing her; "Now, promise me to jump into bed the minute you get home."

"I hope you'll follow your own good advice. I'm sure you must be weary too," said Alison.

"Oh, my dear! I shall write a couple of thousand words before I go to sleep," said Mrs. Tuck, cheerfully; "I left my little girl asleep in a blazing attic and she's got to be rescued by her young man as her hair leaps into flame. By-bye! See you again soon."

Alison knew that by her "little girl" Mrs. Tuck did not mean a daughter of flesh and blood, whom she had deserted in a blazing attic, but the latest child of her serial imagination.

"Two thousand words to be written to-night!" repeated Alison to herself, wonderingly, for her own output was six or seven hundred a day at the most.

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Jerry Cuff answered her note immediately. He wrote on a square sheet of lavender-tinted paper, with the address of his house in Regent's Park printed in purple at the top left hand corner, and a facsimile autograph, "Gerado," on the right hand corner.

She had asked him to tea at her club and he was overjoyed to accept. He sent the kindest messages to Mrs. Booker, and mentioned that, although he was a very busy man, Alison could rely on his punctuality.

She took the hint and was waiting to receive him at the right minute. He was only a quarter of an hour late.

Mr. Gerado followed the page into the reception room as if he were making a stage entrance. Alison's first impression was of a tall man unknown to her, in a suit that Mrs. Tuck would have described on paper as immaculate. He wore a buttonhole of violets, and his gloves were white.

"Ah!" he exclaimed as they met, and, taking her hand, bent down as if he meant to kiss it. Gerado

assumed a manner at times that he considered foreign and fascinating.

As Alison looked into his eyes, searching for the boy she had known, Jerry forgot to act his part. He shook her hand vigorously instead and all his affectation slipped away.

"I say, Alison, I'm awfully glad to see you again!"

"And I'm so glad to see you, Jerry dear."

They found a quiet seat and sat down together, looking at each other with new eyes, but talking in the old, confidential way, as if they had never parted. She almost expected him to rave about Rosamond Courtley, but he seemed to have forgotten her.

It was not long before Alison discovered Jerry's one topic—himself, only himself, but he made it interesting. He had learned to laugh at his own failures and touch on his successes without undue bragging.

He described his "little home" in Regent's Park, telling amusing anecdotes of his different house-keepers, in a way that let his hearer know that it was very comfortable; he casually mentioned that riding was his favourite exercise; he admitted that his tastes were extravagant; he professed to be harassed by the impossibility of taking a long holiday, having contracts signed for nearly three years ahead.

Alison listened and laughed, questioned and agreed, with the sympathy she had always given him. She noticed how correctly he spoke, his courtesy in trifles, and the sincere tone of affection in which he mentioned his father and mother.

It was hard to believe that he was Gerado, whom she had seen on the stage at the Paramount Theatre, doing abominable sketches to please the groundlings.

"Jerry!" she said, in one of the rare pauses in his talk; "I want to ask you a question. May I?"

"Of course!" he replied, looking at her inquisitively; "What is it?"

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"Then why—why do you make such ugly drawings? Surely you're not doing your best at the Paramount."

Jerry's face changed. He was surprised, and angry in a moment.

"I've never done better stuff than I'm doing at the Paramount," he said, quickly; "My turn has never gone half so well before."

"I know the people laugh and clap," Alison went on, rather alarmed at the effect of her words; "But you are so clever, so humorous, that it doesn't seem worthy of you, Jerry."

"Most people think it is original and brilliant to make lightning sketches of members of the audience," he said, in an injured voice.

"Yes, that was a very happy idea, but you know I am speaking of the first part of your turn."

"I assure you it's high class, amusing and artistic," said Jerry, quoting advertisements.

"Artistic—the picture of the drunken school-master? Amusing—the joke about the lodging house servant?" asked Alison, pointedly.

He avoided her eyes for a minute, then looked at her reproachfully.

"I'm sorry my performance disgusts you——" he began.

"That's an exaggeration, Jerry. Don't be unjust."

She put her hand affectionately on his, and his temper cooled.

"Look here, Alison! Honestly I can't see anything to object to in my Paramount show. I've toned it down on purpose. It used to be a little too—well, you know what I mean, but now! I'm sure you could bring your mother or your maiden aunt."

"Then you can't see anything ugly, or harmful, in your work, Jerry?"

"No, I can't, Alison," he rejoined; "Of course it isn't the kind of stuff I meant to do when I was a boy at the Slade. Your old friend, George Chichester,

wouldn't care about it, but I imagine he wouldn't object to earning my salary."

"I think you could do so much better, that's the point," said Alison, finding it hard to believe that he was really so self-satisfied.

"No, my dear, this is the point," said Jerry, assuming the man of the world; "I can't afford to reform the music hall stage. The public applauds my kind of humour. I don't say it's the very best kind, but it *pays*. There's the truth, whether we like it or not. I've learned how to skate over thin ice, and what does it matter so long as I don't go through?"

"I never thought you could reform the music hall stage, Jerry," said Alison, with a smile; "But I deny that it pays to lower your standard. Putting aside the personal pleasure, the delight and satisfaction of doing one's best, I am certain that it is more practical and profitable."

"Can't agree with you, Alison."

"Take my own work, Jerry. I've always believed that readers have a right to one's best. At all events, give it to them. Then, if one succeeds, it's a little reward. If one fails—it doesn't matter."

Jerry shook his head, laughing at her.

"I suppose you still live in Courtley Gardens, and do the housework, and look after your old uncle?" he asked, irrelevantly.

"Yes."

"Well, don't you think that if you'd turned your talents to writing popular books, the sort that sell by the thousands, you'd be able to have a little more pleasure out of life?"

"But my books are popular with certain readers," said Alison; "I couldn't write differently if I tried."

"Not now, but you could have trained yourself to do sentimental stuff, or murder stories, or whatever pays best. You know more about that than I do."

"Come, come, Jerry! Don't be too hard on me," she answered, laughing in her turn; "How many of my books have you read?"

"Well, not exactly all."

"Three? Two? One? Confess, you haven't read a single one."

"Yes, I have. Mrs. Valentine, where I used to live, lent me a copy from her library. I say, it was fine!"

Jerry not only became fluent in its praise, but gave her an outline of the story.

"Now then, haven't I done that novel justice?" he asked, boyishly, after the outburst.

"You have, Jerry dear. It must have been most interesting," said Alison, with twinkling eyes; "I'm sorry to tell you I didn't write it, but the author happens to be a friend of mine. I'll repeat some of your compliments to her."

"I'd better make my exit quick after that!" exclaimed Jerry, joining a little ruefully in her amusement; "When shall I see you again?"

"I'm always at home on Sunday afternoons. You know your way to Courtley Gardens. Come soon."

"Rather! By the way, Alison—it's only a trifle—but will you do something for me?"

"With pleasure, Jerry."

"Then I hope you won't mention to anybody—you must know such a lot of people nowadays—that I used to make drawings in the street. I'm not stuck-up, you know, but a man doesn't like to have a thing like that talked about."

"I'll remember what you say, Jerry, but a day may come when you will be proud of having risen to great heights from such depths."

Alison was sorry directly after she had spoken, but he did not consider her at all sarcastic.

"P'raps you're right, but this is my first engagement at the Paramount, and one can't be too careful.

Well, good-bye! It's been awfully fine to see you again. You haven't altered a bit, dear."

They walked together to the door of the reception room. Suddenly Jerry asked a question she had been expecting all the afternoon.

"I say, is Miss Rosamond Courtley quite well?"

"Very well, thanks. Do you know she is married?"

Jerry lifted his eyebrows, smiled and then sighed.

"Such a captivating, foolish girl," he murmured, not as if he were alluding to her marriage, but to some romantic incident connected with himself in the hoary past.

"Then I suppose the Fraternity of St. Swithin is at an end?" he said, without expressing any curiosity about Rosamond's husband.

"On the contrary, it is still flourishing," replied Alison.

Again, he asked no questions, but shook hands cordially and went away.

"She's a dear!" he thought as he stood outside the club, waiting for a taxi; "But how she's aged! I should hardly have known her."

Alison's thoughts about Jerry were kind and considerate, although she smiled a little in recollection of their talk. It was a book written by Mrs. Tuck which he had mistaken for one of her own. She looked forward to telling that enthusiastic admirer of Gerado all the flattering things he had said about it. Mrs. Tuck declared that praise was like port wine to her.

Alison felt rather lonely at the club after Jerry had left. She was in no mood for talking, even if she had met a personal friend, but all the members she saw were little known to her.

It was past seven o'clock, Jerry having lingered so long in spite of being such a busy man. Alison was about to go home, when she changed her mind. She would dine there. So she went into the dining room,

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chose a table in a quiet corner and ate her meal alone.

As she paid the bill Alison thought of the old days when she wrote interviews for the *Arrow*; and later, paragraphs and little articles for the *Daily Wire*. Then she had hesitated before spending sixpence. It was the same thing still, but with half-crowns.

She sighed impatiently. Would she ever be rich? Despite the sincerity of her words to Jerry, there were times when she longed and longed to be rich.

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It was still early when Alison reached home. She opened the door and went upstairs so quietly that her mother, sitting alone, did not hear her step. Uncle Jonah had gone to bed.

The door of the sitting room was open. Alison stood on the threshold for a couple of minutes, silently, before her mother knew she was there.

Mrs. Booker was no longer upright in figure, but stooped, and her thin hands, always so busy in past years, were folded quietly together. She looked old and colourless and peculiarly still. There was no book, or needlework, on the table before her. She gave an impression of having sat there, in silent patience, for a long time.

"Mother!"

At the sound of Alison's voice she started and looked up. Her whole face seemed to change, quivering and lightening with joy. She was her old, energetic self in a moment, but softer and more gentle.

"Oh, Ally dear!" she exclaimed; "I've been waiting for you. I knew you'd come home as quickly as you could."

"Mother! Haven't you had your supper?" asked Alison, anxiously.

"No, dear, but it's quite ready. I thought you wouldn't like to eat it alone, and I'm sure you must be very tired and hungry by this time."

Alison flushed as she remembered her lazy pleasure

in dining at the club. Her mother had been alone all day—alone with the old man.

The simple room which Alison had once thought so poor and dull—a prison she had called it in her youth—was slowly changing with the unchanging years. It was growing beautiful in her eyes; beautiful in the love that always waited for her there; the selfless love of every day; the divine love of her mother.

CHAPTER XIX

The Fraternity again. Rosamond's marriage. A last night at St. Swithin's. Farewell, Fra Lionel!

ROSAMOND had been married three years at the time of Alison's meeting with Jerry, but, as he evidently took no interest in the affairs of his first love, she had not told him anything about it.

The Fraternity in Shepherd's Bush grew and prospered. To return to its history, at the time of Rosamond's first skirmish with Kate Browning, it will be remembered that three sewing machines had been discovered when the lady of St. Swithin's returned from one of her Summer holidays.

What are three sewing machines after all? Certainly useful, but very unornamental. It would have been the easiest thing possible to have carried them downstairs and out of the house, especially as Fra John Hooper was willing, and Fra Lionel Ford anxious, to do the job at a minute's notice.

Kate Browning had promised that they should go, then why did Rosamond not use the power in her hand? Alas! She agreed to the machines remaining in the workroom until the cheap blouses, then in making, were all finished.

Kate Browning expressed her gratitude in many ways. Rosamond found her a more interesting and much more amusing companion than either the devoted Lucy Stacey or the earnest Mrs. Grain. She

had the gift of making herself useful and making other people work.

Rosamond was apt to neglect trifles in her liking for the boys and girls who attended the classes. If they did not pay regularly, for instance, she never dreamed of refusing to admit them. Kate offered to collect the money, and several old pupils were lost in consequence, but those who remained were filled with wholesome fear of her.

Rosamond worked at any hour which suited her convenience or pleasure, and allowed others to do the same. Kate introduced a rule of strict punctuality.

Rosamond believed in equality and companionship between men and women. Kate approved of the former, but was not in favour of the latter. She said they distracted one another. Outside the Fraternity they could do as they chose. Inside, St. Swithin himself could not have kept young monks and nuns more severely separate.

All these changes were made gradually and generally liked by the old members, with the exception of Fra Lionel. He fell in with them, but became more silent as Rosamond said, more sulky as Kate put it. John Hooper, however, had reached that stage of the tender passion when the beloved can do no wrong.

If Miss Browning had wanted to turn St. Swithin's into a departmental store, Mr. Hooper would have persuaded himself that the Fraternity was bound to evolve in that direction.

There was an extension of the original house, erstwhile the Grapes tavern, on either side, and it was not difficult to induce Rosamond to give the persistent, little red-haired girl entire control of the spinning, weaving—and unhappily sewing machine—branch of the work.

That seemed to satisfy her. She made no new alterations. The old harmony prevailed, and the eyes of the morose Fra Lionel were no longer

offended by her daily presence in his part of the house.

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Alison discovered, at about this time, that there was a change, slight but significant, in the friendship of George Chichester, Rosamond and herself.

It was she who had taken Rosamond to Esher in the old days. It was she who had known about Chichester's pictures and interests. But now it was Rosamond who took her. It was Rosamond who knew him better than she had ever done. It was Rosamond with whom he talked of his work.

Alison did not repine. She was happy in their happiness.

The capable housekeeper, to whom the artist had long entrusted his children, was considerably puzzled by the situation. She would have regretted an ordinary engagement between Mr. Chichester and Miss Courtley, facing the end of her reign with resignation, but she detested uncertainty.

Sometimes Rosamond did not appear upon the scene for weeks together. Sometimes she walked in at most unconventional hours, just after breakfast, or before dinner. She was heard to call the artist "George" or "Mr. Chichester" indiscriminately.

To say that Tiny and Tot were very fond of her is to express their feelings in the mildest language. The housekeeper could not understand it, but, in her own words, they made an idol of Miss Courtley.

She had won their love without any apparent effort. It never occurred to the housekeeper that her beauty and gaiety appealed to children. The good woman considered such attributes only intended, by an inscrutable Providence, to ensnare men.

It did not dawn upon Mrs. Hardacre—the housekeeper had chosen, wedded and buried an unfortunate man named Hardacre—that Mr. Chichester's eccentricity would go to the length of marrying without giving the world formal notice.

Although he *was* an artist, as she observed afterwards, he came of an exceedingly good family, and so (she had been told) did the lady.

Mrs. Hardacre and Rosamond had never crossed swords, but there were times when prudence alone had kept the former from resenting the latter's treatment of Tiny and Tot. The housekeeper thought she was absurdly indulgent. Rosamond was happily unconscious of, and indifferent to, her opinion.

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It was the end of an August day. Chichester, his children and Rosamond had been out of the house all the afternoon, boating on the narrow, winding river Mole.

Mrs. Hardacre happened to be standing at the gate when they returned. She saw them in the far distance, being remarkably sharp-eyed, loitering under the shade of the trees, long before her appearance oppressed Tiny and Tot with a dread of wrong-doing.

Rosamond and the little girls were decked with wild flowers, and Chichester wore a tuft of heather in his buttonhole.

"For all the world like Jack-in-the-green!" was the mental comment of Mrs. Hardacre.

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The slanting sunshine through the boughs rippled and gleamed over Rosamond and the little girls in flickering, uneven splashes. As the artist looked at them he thought that the whole world could show no greater beauty than the beloved of his heart, with his two children, in that golden rain.

It was not the hour of deepest happiness he was to know with Rosamond, but it gave him an exquisite sense of pure joy that his love would never touch again.

Pale colours—pink and mauve and yellow—seemed to radiate from her being, casting not a shadow but

a light over the other two, spreading wide, until they melted into the Summer green of the trees over her head, the hedgerows on either side, even the springing grass under her feet.

Chichester stood still, enraptured, as a man who sees in a dream the vision of a heavenly messenger.

Rosamond turned, drawn by his ardent gaze, to look at him. She felt as he did the perfection of the hour, but she was not so absorbed as the man, for she was listening to the songs of the birds, the whisper of the wind, the dear voices of the children near her . . . the children far away . . .

* * * * *

Mrs. Hardacre watched for an opportunity to speak to Rosamond alone. Mr. Chichester was going to take his visitor home in his car. The housekeeper seized a few minutes, when he was not in the room, to express her disapproval of Tiny and Tot sitting up for an hour later than usual.

"I shall be gone directly, Mrs. Hardacre. As we shall not meet for several weeks, the twins are loth to part with me," pleaded Rosamond.

Mrs. Hardacre was glad to hear that they were not to see her for several weeks, but she did not say so.

"I'm sure you will excuse me for mentioning that you are inclined to spoil the little girls, Miss Courtley," said the housekeeper, civilly, but firmly; "It is only natural in a lady unaccustomed to children, but if they are once allowed to disregard rules and ignore discipline——" Mrs. Hardacre paused and shook her head grimly, as if Tiny and Tot would behave like a regiment of soldiers in mutiny.

"Then you advise me to be very strict with them in the future?" asked Rosamond, with a smile.

Mrs. Hardacre chose to consider the smile a challenge to her authority. She forgot her usual discretion.

"Well, really, madam, I don't expect you'll have much to do with them in the future," she replied.

"Oh, yes, I shall!" observed Rosamond, as if she were speaking more to herself than to Mrs. Hardacre and still smiling, although she saw that her companion was annoyed.

"Oh, yes, you will!" repeated Mrs. Hardacre, with surprise; "I am not aware that you will have *anything* at all to do with them in the future, madam, for I believe Mr. Chichester doesn't intend to change his housekeeper."

"Certainly not, if you and I find we can get on well together," said Rosamond, kindly.

"Miss Courtley!" exclaimed Mrs. Hardacre.

"Haven't I told you? I'm sure I did!" said Rosamond; "Don't you know that Mr. Chichester and I are going to be married, Mrs. Hardacre?"

"How should I know that, madam, if I haven't been informed?" said the housekeeper, with astounded dignity.

"I thought Mr. Chichester would be sure to let you know that he is leaving home to-morrow for three weeks," cried Rosamond.

"Mr. Chichester frequently goes away. Am I to understand that he will be absent this time on his honeymoon?" asked Mrs. Hardacre, trying to speak as if it had happened before and did not surprise her in the very least.

"Yes," said Rosamond; "We are going to be married in London to-morrow at mid-day."

"I'm sure I wish you joy, madam," said Mrs. Hardacre.

"Thank you!" said Rosamond, cordially, although Mrs. Hardacre's tone had implied that she had grave doubts about it.

"And I suppose," continued the excellent woman, "that you wish to postpone the discussion of your future plans, madam, until your return."

"Yes. I dare say we shall be able to come to a

satisfactory arrangement," said Rosamond, trying to be cordial again.

"I hope so, I'm sure," rejoined Mrs. Hardacre, very doubtfully; "I think I hear the car at the gate. Allow me to assist you with your cloak."

* * * * *

There was a little farewell party at the Fraternity that night. Chichester was not there, for Rosamond felt that her old friends would rather have her alone.

The original followers of St. Swithin, with Alison Booker, were waiting for their lady in her own room on the ground floor. Kate Browning was not an original member, but she was there as a matter of course. The management was to pass into her hands.

There was no sadness in this last meeting, for it was an unwritten tenet of the Fraternity never to repine. Every class had left a wedding gift, and Fra John presented each one with a happy little speech.

Mrs. Grain's farewell was lengthy and impressive, having taken the form of a poem in very blank verse, in which she touched upon the lives of many noble women, from Boadicea to Miss Courtley. Fra Lionel had time to run through Morris's "Letters from Nowhere" before he joined in the applause at the end.

Lucy Stacey had made a pair of sandals, and Kate Browning had woven her a beautiful dress.

They talked long of the early days of the Fraternity, and all the friends they had made and lost in the passing of years.

"I shall always be sorry that Wilbur Rathbone deserted us," said Rosamond; "He seemed to be charmed with the Fraternity."

"He went abroad, didn't he?" asked Fra John.

"Only a couple of years ago. He and George

were such old friends, but somehow they drifted apart," answered Rosamond.

"I don't think Mr. Rathbone deserted you willingly," said Alison in a soft voice; "Perhaps there was an unknown, very good reason behind his absence."

"Perhaps," said Rosamond, and there was an end of the subject.

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Lionel Ford was the last to go.

Rosamond went to the door with him, and they stood together for a while, talking as they had talked so many, many times before. But she felt, with all her old, quick intuition, that this was no parting of comrade from comrade for a few weeks. It was the end of a long chapter of youth.

"I shall never forget how you and John Hooper helped and encouraged me, Lionel, when I started the Fraternity," Rosamond said, holding his hand in good-bye; "We meant to do such great things, didn't we? Well, I trust our work hasn't been in vain."

Her tone was wistful, as if she asked once more for his help and encouragement.

"No, Rosamond, it was not in vain, although the Fraternity passes away to-night."

"What do you mean by that, Fra? John and Kate Browning are going to carry on with the old methods. They won't leave it, as I do, for any other home. They will live here when they are married. I hope you will stop and work with them."

"For a little while, till I get another job," said Fra Lionel, indifferently.

"Have you lost your old belief in St. Swithin's?" she asked, reproachfully.

"Can I lose a belief I never possessed?" he said, in his slow way.

"Oh, Lionel! who was more enthusiastic than you

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were? Who worked harder? Who was ready to make greater sacrifices of time and money?" cried Rosamond.

He was silent a minute, staring blankly down the street. Then he made no reply to her outburst, but asked a question himself.

"Do you recollect the first day I came?"

"Of course I do. It was with John, who told me afterwards he had picked you up at a friend's studio, and it had been very difficult to persuade you to come to see me."

"True. John Hooper knew nothing about me, neither did his friend at the studio, who had picked me up in his turn tramping through the New Forest."

"But you told me all about your life and affairs once. Was it true, Lionel?"

"Some of it may have been—I've forgotten what I said," he replied, coolly.

"At all events, I hope it was true that you have a small income, independently of your work?" said Rosamond, anxiously.

"Well, no, that was not true," said Fra Lionel, with some hesitation.

"My dear boy, then why did you say it?"

"To save you from worrying about me, I suppose."

"Oh, Lionel, that was very considerate, but it shames me when I think of how little you have earned at the Fraternity."

He was silent for a minute.

"You know that short poem of Browning's—I mean Robert, not Kate," he said, with a slight smile, "where a man is parting with the woman he loves? I think it's called 'The Lost Mistress.'"

"Yes, I remember it," Rosamond answered, wondering why he asked her.

Fra Lionel repeated the lines:—

"Your voice when you wish the snowdrops back,
Though it stay in my soul for ever!"

"Well, Rosamond, your voice just now, when you pitied me, will stay in my soul for ever."

Rosamond did not reply. The regret, the sympathy, she would have tried to express to any other man would have been futile spoken to him. She felt there was nothing more to be said between them.

They had met as strangers on a dark road. They must part when she turned aside at the welcoming light and shelter of a new home, leaving her fellow wanderer to go on alone.

"Farewell, Rosamond Chichester!" said Fra Lionel, speaking in a tender voice the name she would soon bear; "Do you remember that we agreed not to say 'good-bye' to one another at the Fraternity? Although it means 'God be with you,' we decided it was too sad a word. So—farewell!"

"Farewell, Fra Lionel!"

"God bless you! Farewell——"

He touched her hand, turned, and walked away without looking back.

CHAPTER XX

A last glimpse at old Joe Duggleby. Mrs. Tuck gives a little dinner party. Gerado sketches the guests. Alison meets an old acquaintance who walks home with her. The reason why.

JERRY CUFF did not go to see Alison after their meeting at her club.

He knew she was a well known novelist, but would her friendship help him to "get on"? Jerry was possessed with a passion, at that time of his life, for getting on. It was his one aim and ambition, although he was not at all clear about the point to be reached and what would happen when he had got on.

It was not an attitude to make for popularity with his friends, for it meant the cut direct to many, and sudden, unaccountable affection for others.

Ned Valentine and Mrs. Dobson, for instance, were no longer of any use to him, but he still approved of Blond Valentine. Unfortunately Blond preferred the society of her husband and her mother, and Jerry never felt quite at his ease with her.

He was undecided about old Joe Duggleby, but after ignoring him for years his conscience, at last, drove him to pay his respects once more to the veteran. Jerry was prepared with many excuses for his long absence, but he discovered that old Joe was quite unconscious of his neglect.

"Let me see, what do *you* do to earn your bread

and butter?" said Mr. Duggleby, instead of congratulating Gerado on his many successes.

"I am a lightning artist," replied Jerry; "I've been playing a return date at the Paramount. There are many changes in theatres and music halls since you were before the public, sir."

"Are there?" said old Joe, looking at his young visitor curiously.

"Take my own turn, for instance," continued Jerry; "I expect I should have been howled off the stage years ago. But your modern audiences appreciate artistic work. People are beginning to understand that a true artist is none the worse for making a direct appeal to the best that is in them."

"You're a true artist yourself, ain't you?"

Gerado smiled complacently.

"I'm supposed to be one, Mr. Duggleby."

"Then it's a great pity you didn't go in for circus work," said old Joe.

"My dear sir, I really can't imagine myself as a bare-back rider or a lion tamer," laughed Jerry.

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Mr. Duggleby, amazed at the young man's coolness; "You ought to have been a clown, a good old-fashioned knock-about."

"Do you think it would have cultivated my artistic ability?" asked Jerry contemptuously.

"No—kept your weight down," responded the veteran.

Jerry took the hint in good part and remembered it.

That was the very last time he met old Joe.

A month afterwards Jerry saw a short paragraph in a morning paper, headed "Old Acrobat Dead," announcing that Mr. Joseph Duggleby had died in his sleep on the eve of his ninety-sixth birthday.

His "boys" from all parts of the country were at the funeral, or represented by flowers and messages. He had been generous to so many, often in secret, that there was a feeling of loss all over the great show

world. His name was passed from lip to lip that night, sometimes with an old jest, sometimes with a story of his kindness, or his firmness, always with respect, often with affection and gratitude.

"He hadn't an enemy in the world," said the niece who had kept house for him; "Everybody loved old Joe Duggleby. There were sixteen floral crosses, two shattered columns, one harp with a broken string, and four 'rest' cushions at the funeral to prove it."

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Mrs. Tuck's admiration for Gerado did not pass away with the end of the show.

She asked Alison to introduce him to herself and Mr. Tuck; not that her dear James was at all interested in the young performer, but Mrs. Tuck made a point of sharing all her pleasures in life with her husband—"dragging the poor man in!" her friends said—partly from affection, partly from a business standpoint.

As Mrs. Tuck was the British Matron type of author, she wrote and talked much of the Home, the Heart, the Husband, and the Children. There was only one child to brighten her own household with "innocent prattle and merry laugh," as she would have put it, being an owlish little miss who was extraordinarily well—or ill—read for her tender years, having been encouraged to turn her round-eyed spectacles upon everything in print which came into the house.

Mrs. Tuck asked Jerry Cuff to a small dinner party, given on a Sunday evening. He accepted her invitation with the greatest pleasure, looking upon dinner parties as a pleasant means of getting on.

Alison was another of the guests. She happened to be the last to arrive. Her sense of sight told her there was a party of about ten, judging by the number of men's overcoats in the hall and ladies' cloaks up-

stairs; her sense of smell that roast mutton was one of the dishes to be served; her sense of hearing that Mrs. Tuck was holding forth in the drawing room.

A touch of Alison's old shyness came over her as she went in, greeted by her hostess with effusion, by her host as if he vaguely wondered why she had come, and by silent gazing of everybody else.

It was a minute before she noticed Jerry, looking handsome and up-to-date, on the other side of the room. Mrs. Tuck's visitors rarely looked up-to-date. He was talking to a big, bearded man, who loomed ponderous in comparison with him.

Alison started with surprise. There was no mistaking the big, bearded man. She knew of his friendship with Mr. and Mrs. Tuck, but she had never before met him at their house.

It was Barrington Chase. Barrington of the little *Arrow*. Barrington—much older, much stouter, turning grey, but unmistakably Barrington!

Alison had not seen him since they parted outside his office, at the end of an interrupted love scene. It all came back to her like an act of an old play, with this difference—she had thought it was a tragedy at the time, but now she remembered it as a farce.

Mrs. Tuck caught the look that passed between them. There was recognition, but awkward hesitation on both sides.

"You remember Mr. Barrington Chase, dear Ally?" she said, putting her hand through her friend's arm to draw her across the room; "He was our chief on the *Arrow*. Ah, the happy old days! Mr. Chase, I'm sure you'll be delighted to meet another of your faithful staff—Miss Booker. Isn't it a pleasure for us all to meet again, and not a bit changed in any way, except that Alison is now one of our most promising novelists. Of course you've read her lovely books, Mr. Chase?"

Mrs. Tuck's friendly speech gave Barrington time to recover from his slight embarrassment. It was

very slight, for he had long persuaded himself that little Alison Booker had treated him very ungratefully after his trouble with her contributions. He believed that he had not only inspired her books, but taught her all she knew about writing.

"It is indeed a pleasure to greet the two strongest members of my staff after so long!" exclaimed Barrington, taking Alison's hand in the old, intimate way; "We ventured to call you our Little Bird, Strathern and I, when we were alone together, Mrs. Tuck. I don't think Miss Booker ever assumed a *nom de plume*."

"Yes, I wrote stories under the name of George Weston," said Alison.

"To be sure!" he answered, his heavy eyelids drooping over his heavy eyes as he looked at her inquisitively; "But I meant to say that you had no—no—playful sobriquet, like our good friend here."

"I'm afraid my work for the *Arrow* was a little too hard for me to invent playful sobriquets," said Alison, smiling, almost laughing outright, at his old pompous tone.

Had he spoken quite so slowly and looked quite so portly when she knew him first? Was it true that she had ever cared for this man—ever written to him—ever kissed him—a feeling of repugnance swept over her, but it soon passed in her amusement.

If it had not been for Jerry, who was anxious to talk to her, Alison would have liked to converse—he would call it conversing—with Mr. Chase. But Jerry mistook one of his pauses for a full stop and coolly changed the subject.

She hoped to go down to dinner with one or the other of them, but Mrs. Tuck kept Barrington for herself and gave Jerry to the youngest girl in the room, with whom he promptly began to flirt, not because he liked her, but to keep his hand in.

Alison's man was the meekest little editor she had even seen, who passed his time listening earnestly to

the conversation of a large lady opposite, who spoke on "Causes" all through dinner, and wore a collection of decorations, representing the Causes, on the front of her black velvet gown.

Alison made out two Women's Suffrage badges, a harp surrounded by shamrock (Friends of Ireland), a tiny spade and pick (Pioneer Club), a silver wish-bone (private souvenir), a black key on a white button (unknown secret association), an interwoven T.S. (Theosophical Society), and others hidden by tags of old lace. She learned afterwards that this dame was the wife of the meek editor who hung upon her words, perhaps because nobody else paid much attention to them.

It was no intellectual loss to be separated by the length of the table from Barrington, for interest in his dinner prevented him from either talking, or listening, with his usual urbanity.

This did not matter to Mrs. Tuck, as it happened, for the guest on her other side being an admirer of her works, she was able to give her views on literary affairs, enlivened with personal anecdotes, besides "taking care of everybody else." Mr. Tuck was about as good a host as his wife's typewriter would have been—indeed her dear James was as quiet as the machine unless she tackled him.

When the heavy part of the very good dinner had been attacked and disappeared, light skirmishing with dessert set Barrington at liberty to be genial and leisurely. No one present had been more vigorous and determined to let nothing pass him in the campaign, and no one was more self-satisfied at the end of it.

The conversation turned upon journalism and Barrington made it personal. His favourite tales and adventures, which had so impressed Alison once upon a time, were re-told with the additions and exaggerations of frequent repetition; the career of his old chief, Strathern, had become entangled with his

own, and a good memory for scraps of talk with other well known men, writers and politicians, enabled him to make a great impression on the company.

Alison observed, however, that the meek editor kept his eyes on his plate, except for an occasional glance of polite incredulity at Barrington, and once she caught him giving a wink—as quick as thought, but unmistakably a wink—to his wife opposite.

When the men came into the drawing room, after dinner, Barrington Chase walked deliberately towards Alison, sat down, and began to talk in a low voice, his manner successfully checking Jerry Cuff in his desire to join them.

“Life holds many disappointments,” said Barrington, so quickly that she thought he must have prepared the speech as he came upstairs; “I hoped to have had the pleasure of taking you down to dinner, Miss Booker, or sitting within measurable distance, but I was not my own master. Perhaps it is as well, for then I’m afraid I should have been too absorbed in our conversation to do justice to Mrs. Tuck’s lavish hospitality.”

“That would have been a great pity, Mr. Chase,” said Alison.

She had expected to feel a touch of agitation at talking to him again, but it was not in the least exciting. She returned his long gaze with indifference, not forgetting a time when her eyes always drooped beneath it.

“Just the same! Just the same!” murmured Barrington, softly and sentimentally.

“If you mean that I am just the same, Mr. Chase, I’m afraid you have lost your keen observation,” said Alison, not at all moved by the compliment.

“Time has been very kind to you. He has passed you by untouched—and I’m sure I can say the same of our good friend, Mrs. Tuck,” he added, gravely.

Alison laughed. Barrington was obviously deter-

mined, like Mr. Tony Weller on a memorable occasion, not to go too far.

"I need hardly describe the keen interest with which I have followed your career as a writer," he went on; "Every one of your novels finds its way to our library table. My sisters have admired your work since they read the first little tales in the *Arrow*. I have lost my dear mother, but we still live in the same house in Wimbledon."

"Yes?" said Alison, who had never seen his mother, sisters, or house.

"I expect you have heard I am now a partner at Thoroughgoods?"

"Mrs. Tuck mentioned it to me."

Mr. Chase waited a minute to be questioned, but as Alison did not speak, he gave her a sketch of the firm's principal activities and his own responsible share in the business. He concluded that she was anxious to know about his affairs.

"So you see my working days are very fully occupied," he continued; "But I make time to keep up-to-date in modern fiction, although Thoroughgoods never touch it. Will you allow me to say that I find a vast improvement in your work in many particulars?"

"I will allow you to say whatever you please, Mr. Chase."

"Good!"

The old emphasis on his favourite word was so familiar in Alison's ears that she almost expected to see him turning round on a swivel chair.

"Then perhaps you will not consider me carping if I confess that I miss a certain freshness, or unconscious simplicity, in the later books? There is unexpected strength in them and they are exceptionally broad-minded for the work of a woman, but I miss—how shall I put it?—a certain ingenuousness that appealed to me so strongly in your short stories."

"If that quality is lost, I'm afraid I can't get it

back even to please such a critic as yourself," said Alison.

"Very true," he agreed; "You may recollect that it was always a whim of mine to read between the lines of a story, especially when I was personally interested in an author and wanted to make a study of his character."

"Do you think that even a short story is bound to be autobiographical?" asked Alison.

"To a certain degree—yes. A very small degree, I admit. With a novel it is comparatively easy for a man who has the gift. Now it has struck me that your books are not buoyant books, although their humour has been justly commended by the Press."

"Then you think they are despondent books?" said Alison, who could not see his drift.

"N—no," said Barrington, feeling his way; "May I speak quite frankly, as if you were not the authoress and I were not an old friend who so thoroughly understands your style? Well, I should be inclined to believe that life has not been so kind to you as you deserve. You have suffered, as we sensitive people always suffer, from hidden disappointments and regrets, from desires unrealized, and thwarted hopes. But of course I may be quite wrong."

Alison smiled, but she could not control the blood quickening for a second in her veins and flushing into her cheeks, as if a clumsy hand had touched upon a wound.

She thought of Wilbur Rathbone. Was the secret of her life so ill kept that even this stranger could read it in her books?

Barrington Chase saw the change in her expression, momentary as it was, and doted on the beautiful colour that faded slowly away. He had forgotten much of her self-revelation when she thought he loved her, but the first and only time he had held her in his arms lived in his sensuous recollection.

He glanced round the room. The other guests

were sitting near the piano. Mr. Tuck was about to sing, accompanied by his wife. Barrington Chase felt an unreasonable hatred for his host and hostess. It was not the first time the woman had interrupted him at a vital minute, and how could he go on talking to Alison when the man was singing?

To add to his petty anger, the chosen song was passionate and intense, but to hear Mr. Tuck giving it forth in a dull, slow, throaty baritone voice, peeping solemnly over the edge of the music he held close to his short-sighted eyes, was enough to kill sentiment and tenderness.

"I know of two white arms waiting for me!" sang Mr. Tuck.

Barrington drew his chair a little nearer to Alison, but she did not notice it. He looked at her earnestly, but it was difficult for a man to express so many different feelings as he wished to do in a single glance.

"I know of two red lips——" sang Mr. Tuck.

Barrington wanted Alison to see, when she looked at him again, that he regretted their parting, but without giving her any hope for the future. He wanted her to understand that it was Fate, not his philandering, which had caused all her unhappiness; also that he had loved her too well for his own peace and had never married; likewise that it was her lack of confidence and fidelity which had shattered his belief in woman; but he forgave her; he would be her friend, her affectionate friend, for the rest of their lives—and so on and so on.

Unfortunately Alison had not enough penetration to read all these sentiments in his face. So he was disappointed when she only remarked that Mrs. Tuck was a good accompanist.

Jerry Cuff, in the meantime, had been listening with great patience to the lady of many Causes. But he was thoroughly tired of sitting in the background, and even envied Mr. Tuck the faint clapping of hands at the end of his song.

There was no professional objection to performing in private about Jerry. He offered to make a sketch of his hostess at the piano—"Just as you are, dear lady. Don't move an inch!"—but discovered that the light was not good enough.

So there ensued a great switching on and off of lights, followed by a pulling about of chairs, running to the top of the house to find an old easel, running to the bottom of the house for sheets of paper, with Jerry directing the men and captivating the women.

Alison felt a little nervous, dreading that his sense of the ridiculous would slip into the point of his pencil. But Jerry was in a good humour and anxious to be liked. He also wanted to make Alison proud of her friend.

His first sketch of Mrs. Tuck was decidedly retrospective. If he had known her in her twenties he could not have succeeded better. It happened that no one present had known her in her twenties, except Mr. Tuck, and he loyally agreed with the general opinion that it was exactly like her at that minute. "Sauce for the goose——" thought Jerry and made the portrait of her husband equally youthful.

He resisted the temptation to draw the lady of Causes holding a quart pot with the small editor peeping over the edge, and delighted the girl he had flirted with at dinner by tactful flattery. Alison's latest book had been called "The Occasion," so he made a drawing of her correcting proofs, in which she sat knee-deep, and wrote underneath it:—"Improving the Occasion," a sly thrust at her gravity.

Jerry did not allow anyone to see the portraits until they were finished. He left Barrington Chase to the last, and hesitated when it was done, frowning a little. Then he beckoned to Alison to look.

"Mr. Gerado is going to give you a Private View," said Barrington, not ill pleased; "Perhaps he thinks that my face is better known to you than to the

others," he added, in a lower voice, as she left her chair.

"Well, shall we show it to them?" asked Jerry.

She looked at the sketch with a peculiar expression. It was so clever, so hideous, so cruel, but exactly like Barrington Chase. Jerry had seized upon every bad point to exaggerate, besides making him grossly fat.

Alison glanced from the drawing to the man, smiling complacently, wholly unconscious of the sword of mockery hanging over his head.

If she had wanted to be meanly revenged, the opportunity had come. The kindest beholder would not be able to avoid a laugh at Barrington. It was the only brutal caricature Jerry had done that night; he was proud of it, but knew very well it would strike home.

It would have been hard for Barrington to see a little joke at his own expense, but this was so true and so coarse that even such an egoist must have been wounded. At the same time, Gerado had warned his audience, and all the others had taken his thrusts in good part.

"Shall we show it to them?" repeated Jerry, grinning at Alison.

"No!" she replied, with sudden decision.

"I say, why not?" he asked, taking it off the easel.

Alison saw she must act quickly or it would be too late to save Barrington.

"Please, Mr. Gerado!" she said, as sweetly as she could, and laid her hand on his arm.

"She is going to ask him to give it to her!" thought Barrington, flushed with conceit and admiration.

Constant, devoted woman!

Jerry paused a minute, divided between his mischievous pleasure in the caricature and his wish to oblige Alison.

"Oh, very well! Do what you like. It's only a trifle!" he said, graciously.

Alison smiled her thanks and promptly tore the sketch into little pieces. There was a general cry of remonstrance, Barrington's voice being the loudest.

Her action bewildered him. He could only believe that Gerado had not done him justice. Could she be jealous—but of whom? He looked at the other women in the room. There was not one of them so good-looking as Alison except the girl whom Jerry had taken in to dinner. She was decidedly pretty, and so young. Alison had looked as young in the days of the *Arrow*, but now——! He was sorry he had compared her with the girl, for it lessened his pride in her faithfulness. Perhaps she had not been sought by another man, and who cares for a possession that others have never coveted?

Jerry was beginning a second sketch as these thoughts passed through Barrington's mind. It was the worst he had done, slight and commonplace, but sufficiently like his subject to satisfy the little audience.

He was thanked again and again, and, always having an eye to effect, immediately afterwards took his leave, retiring as it were to the sound of applause.

Mrs. Tuck was delighted with the success of her party.

"I shall have my portrait framed," she said, "and give it to my little girl when she grows up. James, you must let me hang yours over my writing table. It will inspire me to increase my output."

"I hope not!" thought the meek editor.

Barrington was determined to talk to Alison once more, but it was difficult to manage. She evidently meant to go away with the other guests. They were clustered about Mrs. Tuck, and she was waiting for her turn to say good-bye. He rose from his chair and joined the group.

"Do you know," he said, bending down to Alison

a little and speaking in a tone that was meant to be jocular; "I've been inclined, dozens of times, to look you up at Courtley Gardens. You still live at Courtley Gardens?"

"Yes."

"But I was not at all sure of my reception," he continued, more gaily than ever; "It seems a pity that all our *Arrow* staff should be scattered far and wide and never meet, doesn't it?"

Alison did not answer, for she saw her opportunity to shake hands with Mr. and Mrs. Tuck. Barrington followed her example. Then he lingered in the hall until she came downstairs.

"Are you driving home?" he asked, stepping forward.

"No, our house is only ten minutes' walk from here."

"Will you allow me—may I have the pleasure of escorting you?"

"If you like, Mr. Chase. Thank you."

"Good!"

They had occasionally walked together from the *Arrow* office to Charing Cross. Alison remembered how she had felt in those days, with Barrington surging along beside her, rarely speaking, gazing over the heads of other people, grandly indifferent as to her safety in crossing roads or pushing through jostling crowds.

She was prepared, after observing him all the evening, to be ignored in the old way, so when he began to quote poetry she was considerably startled.

"I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth, I know not where——"

said Barrington, and repeated the well known verses in a tone that Mrs. Tuck would have called sonorous and impressive.

There was silence when he had done. Fortunately

the back streets were empty, for it was nearly midnight. He had a loud voice when reciting.

"That is a touching little poem," observed Barrington; "It was written by Longfellow."

"So I believe," said Alison.

"It seems to me as extraordinarily applicable to our talk that was interrupted by the adieux to Mrs. Tuck," he continued; "How does it strike you?"

"We never shot any arrows into the air of Fleet Street when we worked for Mr. Strathern's little weekly, did we, Mr. Chase?" asked Alison, innocently.

"Shafts of wit! Arrows of thought!" he exclaimed.

"Ah! I suppose you mean paragraphs," she said, trying not to smile.

He was surprised at her obtuseness.

"Let us ignore the first two verses of the poem. I was alluding to the end:—'And the song, from beginning to end, I found again in the heart of a friend.' To-night——" Barrington drew a little closer—"I feel the truth of those words. I seem to see, perhaps for the first time with perfect clearness, the sweet possibilities of friendship. It never struck me before that it needs subtlety and differences of temperament, character and experience. In brief, the essential differences between men and women.

"I have many loyal comrades among men, but there are few women who are worthy—no, I won't say that—who are capable of holding a man's friendship. They can inspire it, but they too often lack the disinterestedness and impersonal outlook that we need if we are to give of our best in return."

Alison said nothing.

"I know we must not expect too much from a young girl——" Barrington became a trifle confused, but quickly recovered himself—"but when a woman has reached her maturity, mentally and spiritually, she can appreciate the rare gift of a man's perfect con-

fidence and friendship. Why shouldn't we prove to the world, you and I, that such affection, for it is the truest affection, is not only possible but of priceless value. Why shouldn't we go on together, as man and woman, go on and on——"

"Because this is where I live!" interrupted Alison; "I really can't go on any farther."

Barrington was too offended for a moment to speak.

He had forgiven her lack of response at the pauses in his soliloquy, for it showed her womanly hesitation and diffidence, but he was astounded at her denseness.

She stood still, holding out her hand, and there was enough of her youth left to remind him of the time when he found her charming.

It was moonlight and they were alone in the street.

He took the hand and began to pull her slowly and tenderly towards him. She resisted, not in a rage, but with such a quick, decisive movement that he let her go at once.

"Alison! Have I changed so much that you can't speak to me, or even look at me, in the old way? Why is it?" whispered Barrington.

"No, you haven't changed at all, and that's the reason why!" replied Alison, very distinctly.

"I don't understand——" stammered Barrington.

"Think it over and you will. Good night!"

She gave a curt nod, went up the steps, opened the door, passed in and shut it again, without one backward glance.

Barrington Chase stood still where she had left him, thinking it over.

CHAPTER XXI

Re-appearance in the story of the name of Coral de Lacey. How she told Gerado's fortune at a Garden Party. His meeting with Julia Toms. Her unknown home. Coral makes up her mind to capture Jerry.

MISS CORAL DE LACEY has not been mentioned since the first chapter of this book, when Alison interviewed her at the old Strand Theatre in the Strand.

Coral was not very young at the time the *Arrow* was running. There was little change in her when she first met Jerry Cuff. It was at a Garden Party, given at the house of the manager of the Paramount Theatre, in aid of the Restoration Fund of St. Augustine's, an old church in which the manager's wife was interested.

Church and stage were both represented, the former by the vicar and his curate, the latter by a majority of the guests. The vicar really looked in need of restoration himself, being feeble and aged, but the curate was young and full of energy.

It was charming to see how the reverend gentleman ran about the grounds in the heat, bare-headed, to encourage the charitable by his good example. When visitors arrived he was at the door, with Mrs. Lusher (the manager's wife) to bid them welcome; he helped to serve the strawberries; he sold tickets for the entertainments in a marquee on the lawn; he permitted his character to be read by an amateur phrenologist, and his hand by two palmists, for the

amusement of a crowd; he played skilfully at Aunt Sally, and he sold picture postcards of St. Augustine's.

It was most edifying of all to hear him talking to stray actors and actresses about "ringing up," and "the ghost walking," and "going on the road," and "making a hit," which showed his extraordinary knowledge of theatrical life, "as if he were one of themselves," as the vicar's daughter said.

Miss Coral de Lacey told fortunes with cards, under a big Japanese umbrella, at a little table covered with green baize.

She was dressed like a (stage) gipsy, with a scarlet handkerchief on her black hair. A pretty woman, Coral de Lacey, if a trifle—only a trifle—haggard and worn under the "make up;" with dark, bright eyes, red lips too thin, perfect teeth, a long throat, and a very slender figure.

Miss de Lacey's latest pet, a particularly ugly bulldog, was lying on the grass at her feet. It was Beauty and the Beast, as the curate, and everybody else, originally remarked.

Gerado had promised Mrs. Lusher to make portrait sketches, five shillings plain, ten shillings coloured. He stood in a little tent, entertaining his sitters with the style of patter he had discarded on the stage. Samples of his work were pinned on the canvas outside.

Jerry was happy, his tent being the most popular place in the garden. He felt he was "getting on," and dashed off his sketches with incredible speed.

Coral de Lacey frequently turned her head to look at the little group of his patrons. Her fortune-telling was not half so successful. She had seen Gerado on the stage, but never met him.

"Coral!" cried Mrs. Lusher, as she passed by; "Do go and have some iced coffee, or strawberries. You must be nearly dead. Do!"

Miss de Lacey waited until Mrs. Lusher had dis-

appeared. Then she stepped lightly across the lawn, in her red-heeled shoes, to Jerry's tent. He was sitting on a stool, resting. It was the first time business had been slack. She had had no idea the lightning artist was such a handsome fellow.

She laid ten shillings in silver upon the table beside him. Jerry had been half asleep. He started at the click of the coins, stared at the captivating gipsy for a second and then quickly rose to his feet.

"A sketch, if you please, coloured," said Miss de Lacey; "Unless you think it will be better for me to be 'plain.'"

"I say, that wouldn't be possible!" said Jerry, who was always ready with obvious compliments.

Coral smiled as brightly as if such an answer would never have occurred to her. Jerry pinned a fresh paper on his drawing board. She turned her left profile towards him—it was the better side of her face—and lowered her dark lashes demurely.

He began to draw, but stopped in a minute, stepping back from the easel, with his head on one side.

"Don't like the position. D'you know, Miss de Lacey, I think I want to have you full face."

The lady made the half turn.

"That's all right. Please lower your chin a bit. Thanks. Lift the eyelids—not so high. Look straight at me. Fine! Thanks."

Miss de Lacey obeyed his commands. She looked straight at him. He was apparently absorbed in his work. He was not only handsome, she thought, but intelligent. When Coral called a man intelligent, it meant that he admired her. She was as greedy for admiration as for money.

* * * * *

Jerry Cuff could not have fallen into worse hands; not that he was a boy to be pitied, but for the reason that Coral de Lacey was hard and mercenary,

possessed of none of the generosity and good-heartedness that redeem so many women of her type.

She lived for herself, and, in a lesser degree, for her only child, a spoilt boy of ten. Her husband had been given the custody of the child by the law, when they parted, but as he had married again and cared little about him, an annual visit of one month to the mother had gradually extended to include the other eleven.

He was at school, having outgrown the velvet-suit, long-haired, pretty age, and Coral alternately longed for him and was relieved at his absence.

She had never fallen in love, and had no intention of marrying again.

* * * * *

Jerry made a capital sketch, signed it, and begged her to pose for a little longer. He wanted to do a replica for himself.

He said this so naturally that even Coral, with her experience of flattery, did not suspect that he was in the habit of making the request to pretty women as a matter of course. As he once said to Blond Valentine, who saw through his little ways, "it always fetched 'em."

Jerry did not take any trouble over the second portrait. He was anxious for the charming gipsy to tell his fortune, so they went to her table under the Japanese umbrella, after he had fastened a note outside his tent:—"Artist out. Whistle or wait."

Coral made a serious business of her fortune-telling, in which she thoroughly believed, and used an old deck of cards—not a commonplace pack—quaintly painted with grotesque figures.

Jerry shuffled and cut many times. It seemed to be necessary for them both to lean their elbows on the small table and talk in low voices. There was no reason for this, as Coral only repeated the usual nonsense. He was to beware of a fair man, meet a dark

woman, get a letter from abroad, hear of a death, and so on. The amateur gipsy assured him, however, that she "laid the cards" for herself every week and always read the truth in them.

It is impossible to say how long the two would have sat together if the curate, as spokesman for several art patrons, had not recalled Gerado to his duties.

Coral told him to fly, but the interruption slightly ruffled her temper, judging by the very disagreeable revelations of the cards to an elderly lady who was the next to cross her palm with silver. But Coral, relenting at the end of the interview, told the elderly lady that her married life had been a severe trial, and the elderly lady afterwards told her husband that it was really remarkable and so true.

* * * * *

The Garden Party, for the Restoration of St. Augustine's church, proved to be one of the most important days in Jerry Cuff's life.

In the afternoon he had met Coral de Lacey. The same evening he met Julia Toms, the oldest daughter of the Toms family, musicians and acrobats.

The family was giving a very spirited turn at the Paramount, appearing on the stage just before Gerado. There were two brothers, three sisters, a father and mother. Mr. and Mrs. Toms were husband and wife, but the boys and girls, known professionally as their children, were not related to them or to each other.

Julia attracted Jerry directly he saw her. She was then standing on Mr. Toms's shoulders, playing a silver cornet, while the remainder of the family accompanied her on various instruments, with Mrs. Toms conducting. The stage was flooded with light, their costumes gleamed and glittered, and the whole effect was brilliant.

Julia ran up against Jerry by accident, in the semi-darkness behind the scenes, after their turn was over.

She was hurrying to the dressing-rooms, with a brown holland wrapper hiding her sparkling frock.

"Joo-lear! Look out where you're going!" said Mrs. Toms, who was following her.

"I'm sure I beg pardon!" exclaimed the girl.

She looked up at Jerry and instantly recognized him.

"Oh, it's Gerado, the wonderful artist!" gasped Julia.

She was not so much a pretty girl, as a girl made beautiful by fine health and gaiety; light-hearted, sensible, lovable, good. Everybody liked Julia, all for different reasons; her professional father because she had pluck and ambition; her professional mother for her sweet temper and usefulness; her professional brothers and sisters for her kindness and jollity. She was over twenty, but looked sixteen.

"Yes, I'm Gerado," said Jerry, flattered by her tone; "Have you seen my show?"

"Rather! Twice here, once at Brixton, and three times at different halls in North London," replied the girl, rapidly.

"Why didn't you come on to the stage somewhere and let me draw your portrait?" asked Jerry.

Julia laughed as if he had made a good joke.

"Oh, I wouldn't like to be so saucy," she said.

This was a new idea to Gerado. It had never struck him that posing for an artist could be considered saucy.

"Well, you shall give me a chance in private," he answered.

"I admire your cheek!" retorted Julia.

"Do you? Like to touch it?" asked Jerry, impudently, stooping down.

The girl shook her head decisively and laughed again.

"Now, Joo-lear, are you coming along to-night?" said Mrs. Toms, who had left her behind and now waited at the door leading off the stage.

"Just coming, Mum. Good-night, Mr. Gerado."

"Good-bye, Joo-lear!" said Jerry, mimicing Mrs. Toms in a soft voice.

"My name is Miss Toms, if you please!" was her parting shot.

"Is it? Mine's Jerry," he called after her.

Then he went on the stage, carrying with him a vivid impression of a bright face and a pretty laugh.

Youth calls to youth. But unluckily Jerry had been captivated by Coral de Lacey. Captivated, but not caught. He was simple, but no fool—very different from the boy who had lost his heart over Rosamond Courtley and his head over Blond Valentine.

For many weeks after the Garden Party Gerado was the not too willing slave of Coral. He bought her flowers, paid for her private taxi, took her out to dinner, and lent her more money than he ever confessed, or was ever paid. She was charming to him, but slightly bored.

Every evening he managed to talk to Julia Toms, touched and flattered by her frank admiration of his work, but not so happy in winning her confidence. She refused to talk about herself, and Jerry was astute enough to guess that she was different from the other members of the Toms Family; not in the way she spoke or did her work, but in outlook and thought.

He tried to find out where she lived, having discovered that it was not with Mr. and Mrs. Toms, but she would not tell him.

The first time he saw her in ordinary clothes it was with a little shock of surprise. He was a good judge of women's clothes, and Julia dressed so very plainly that he doubted whether her whole attire, from shoes to tam o' shanter, could have cost half as much as one of Miss de Lacey's hats.

Jerry thought she looked even better than in her sparkling stage costume, but he would not have cared to take her out with him. She was the dearest little thing, but obviously ignorant of the art of "getting

on." She looked poor. Strange! For he knew she must be earning a good salary, and all women, he believed, were ambitious and extravagant.

One night he spoke to her, jestingly, about money. They were sitting in a small room at the Paramount, near to the stage, perhaps the last apology for an old-fashioned Green Room to be found in a London theatre.

"What do you do with your little share of the Toms fortune, Julia?" asked Jerry, bluntly.

"Pay my bus fares backwards and forwards," she answered, determined not to satisfy his curiosity.

"From your home to the theatre? How much does it cost you? How far is it?"

"Ask another!" said Julia; "Why are you inquisitive to know what I do with my salary, Jerry?"

He laughed at her sharpness.

"Because I'm afraid you don't spend enough on yourself, my dear girl."

"Ah, well! Some of us spend too much."

"Present company not excepted?" asked Jerry, pointing at himself.

"If the cap fits, Mr. Gerado, put it on."

"I don't waste money, Miss Toms. Other people waste it for me."

"Same thing here. I don't save money, other people save it for me."

"Rather too bad when you work so hard to earn it."

Julia burst into one of her happy laughs, but he could not see the reason.

"My work at the theatre is mere play," she said; "I was trained so well and Mr. Toms hardly ever alters the turn. That blessed old silver cornet could play itself. I've blown away at the same tune for weeks and weeks. I wonder I haven't blown myself inside out."

"Were you trained by Mr. Toms?"

"Oh, no! My Dad taught me. He was a real musician, you know."

"You're a real musician yourself, aren't you, Julia?"

"I like music, but you can't say playing all sorts of instruments standing on your head is quite so fine as grand opera, or concerts, can you?"

"Perhaps not: Did your Dad sing in grand opera, or at concerts?"

"Not sing, Jerry, he played the fiddle in an orchestra."

"When did you lose him, Julia?"

"Thank you, I haven't lost him," and she vigorously shook her head; "He lives at home now. He's retired."

"Then he has pots of money I suppose?"

"Pots!" she replied, emphatically; "He sits in the drawing-room all day, smoking his two bob cigars, or wanders among the flower beds, listening to the birds."

"Then you live out of London?"

"N—no," said Julia, as if she were not quite sure; "But it's very airy and pleasant."

"I think if your Dad has such a ripping place, he might afford to keep his daughter at home. What does your mother say?"

"My mother is dead," replied the girl, with a change of expression.

"I'm sorry, dear——" and Jerry took her hand.

"It happened a long time ago, when I was only fifteen, Jerry, but it might have been yesterday by the way I miss her."

Julia sat quietly for a minute, with her eyes half closed, thinking. Then she gave a little sigh, and looked at him again with a smile.

"I try never to be down in the mouth for Dad's sake. I promised Mother to keep our home bright and jolly."

"I wish you'd let me come and see you in your home, Julia," said the young man, gently.

She shook her head.

"Why not, dear?"

“You wouldn’t like it, Jerry. It isn’t your style. It’s not a bit like Monarch Mansions.”

Jerry started. Coral de Lacey lived in Monarch Mansions, a block of new flats, ugly without, stuffy within, expensive and popular.

“What do you know about Monarch Mansions?” he asked, quickly.

“Nothing, but I saw you get out of a taxi and go in there the other day.”

He hesitated for a minute before speaking.

“Is that all? By the way, have you met Miss de Lacey? She’s in this new piece—what’s its name?—at the Crush.”

Julia had never met her and asked him no questions. He was a little disappointed. Perhaps he would have liked her to be curious about his women friends. He had never known a girl who seemed so pleased to see him every evening, but so indifferent about his affairs.

* * * * *

A change came over Coral de Lacey’s opinion of Gerado. It was a couple of months after she had told his fortune at the Garden Party.

She had seen him nearly every day and discovered that, despite his boyishness, he was not the good-looking simpleton she had imagined. His work impressed her, and she was surprised by his shrewdness and observation. He was as generous as she had hoped, but he was evidently getting tired of her artless way of confusing his money with her own.

At first it was she who had been bored, but it really seemed as if the position would be reversed.

When Coral realized this she was astounded. It was not her first experience of the kind, but for Gerado—Jerry Cuff, a mere music hall man!—to fall out of love as quickly as she thought he had fallen in, wounded her vanity and pride.

Jerry became of value only when she dreaded losing him.

If one could have looked below the surface of her

shallow mind he would have seen a doubtful plot forming there, now encouraged by her conceit, now resigned in her indecision, but slowly growing stronger day after day.

Many women make such a plot, but few are so intensely selfish as Coral. While all her thoughts revolved about Jerry, the happiness of his life was only important to her as it affected her own.

In brief, Miss de Lacey was seriously making up her mind whether it would be a good speculation to marry Gerado. Would it be safe? Would it be prudent? Would it interfere with the prospects of her son?

There were social advantages in being married. She knew that from past experience. Also, she wished her divorce to be forgotten. Gerado was not at all curious about it, for she had tested him. That was well. He was presentable and manageable; not rich as yet, but she did not undervalue his talents; good-tempered and temperate.

Coral liked him, or she would not have given the idea a second thought. She liked him as much as she was capable of liking any man, having the sense to appreciate his honesty and kindness. While she was still hesitating she began—to be on the safe side—treating Jerry in a very different way.

The change was too subtle for him at first; then he was a little troubled, thinking that Coral cared for him more than he had supposed. The troubled feeling did not last long. She was always alluring, and he was quick enough to perceive that she wished to please and flatter him.

Coral, like a good angler, played him very skilfully. If it had not been for the likeable, lovable girl, Julia of the Toms Family, Gerado would have been successfully landed.

Time and again, when he was alone with the fascinating Coral, it was only the faint echo in his brain of Julia's delicious laugh which saved him from triumphant capture.

CHAPTER XXII

The matter in the last chapter is continued. How Jerry followed Julia to the wilds of Kilburn. A picture of Home.

"GERADO, in a storm of rage, crashed the door of Miss de Lacey's flat behind him and rushed distractedly out of Monarch Mansions."

Mrs. Tuck, of serial fame, would have so described the behaviour of Jerry Cuff, one November afternoon, at the end of a stormy scene with Coral. It is true that he so far forgot his dignity as to bang the door, but he did not rush distractedly away. He sauntered downstairs, with an air of indifference, agreed with the hall porter's remark that the weather was most unpleasant, and coolly walked off.

It was not their first quarrel, but it should be their last, Jerry indignantly said to himself.

He was not engaged to Coral de Lacey. All her skill had failed to evoke the definite word. The cleverest women make blunders. Coral, on that particular day, had over-estimated her own power.

She was in a bad temper and Jerry had annoyed her. Instead of getting rid of the poor fellow tactfully, or making the best of him, she had given free play to her sharp tongue. He had attempted to pacify her with love-making. She had then accused him of inconstancy, but that was a bad error, for Jerry had suddenly rebelled at the implied bondage.

Coral saw the false step she had made, but was too proud to withdraw.

They parted angrily, Coral's satisfaction at having the last word being dashed by the sound of the banged door.

Instead of dining at the club, his usual custom, Jerry took a taxi to his own house in Regent's Park.

It was usually a comfortable little house, but cheerless on such a gloomy day. He was not expected; his housekeeper and the fire in the dining-room had both gone out. The dinner hastily prepared by a young servant was as heavy—especially the pancakes—as the fog outside, and he felt inclined to telephone to the theatre that Mr. Gerado sent his compliments and was too near death to perform that evening.

Sitting in his dull house, he compared it to Coral de Lacey's flat, hot, luxurious, softly coloured, scented with flowers. She liked him to be lazy, smoke, doze, eat and drink. It was her system with men, and she did not suspect that Jerry had chafed more than once and longed to get away.

Coral herself still charmed him. He could not understand the scene of the afternoon, forgetting already her stinging speeches in the lingering impression of sweetness on other days.

There was a letter from her waiting for Jerry at the theatre, sent by special messenger.

He opened the square, pink envelope with a feeling of pleasant expectation. If it had been a love letter he was in the mood to return a grateful answer, but when he found himself reproached and commanded to make his peace by apologies, he was hurt and angry, in spite of the fond beginning, "Gerado mine," and "Always your Coral" at the end.

So he tore the letter into pieces and threw it away.

* * * * *

The fog had lifted when Jerry left the theatre, but

still hung low over the streets, while cold, drizzly rain was falling.

He had not seen any members of the Toms Family that night. Just ahead of him, at the end of the little passage leading to the stage door, he recognized Julia. As a rule she drove away with Mr. and Mrs. Toms, but the carriage was not in sight. She was walking very quickly, almost running, gripping an open umbrella in one hand.

The idea of following her flashed into Jerry's mind. The driver of his own taxi was standing by the edge of the pavement, waiting for him.

"You're out very early, sir," said the man as he approached.

"Yes. I'm going to walk. I shan't want you again to-night. By-bye!" answered Jerry.

He nearly lost Julia, in the stream of people hurrying in both directions, at the end of the passage. She had turned towards Piccadilly Circus and Jerry sped after her.

He had never seen a girl make her way more quickly through a crowd, looking neither to the right nor left. He saw one man speak to her as she passed, stooping to bring his mouth close to her ear. Jerry would have given a good deal to kick him, but Julia might have been deaf for all the notice she took. She did not even start away, but pressed on steadily.

When she jumped into a Kilburn omnibus, at the Circus, Jerry climbed on top, taking a seat at the back, where he could lean over the side and watch for her getting out.

He knew the route well, remembering the time when he lived in North West London with Mr. and Mrs. Valentine.

It would have been a long, dreary journey but for the cheerfulness of an old soldier of the Salvation Army. When he had asked his three fellow passengers after their souls, receiving no reply except

from Jerry, the veteran sang a hymn for his own benefit, with long stops between the words :—

“ The old time religion is good enough for me ;
 ’Twas good enough for Peter when he walked upon the
 sea ;
 ’Twas good enough for Dan’l when in the lions’ den ;
 So surely it is good enough for honest workin’ men ! ”

The song had many verses, but just as he was repeating the chorus for the fourth time the bus stopped ; Jerry bent over the rail and saw Julia jump off the step.

“ Here we are at last ! ” thought Jerry.

He was wrong. Julia turned from the main road and began to thread her way through narrow streets, far from that part of Kilburn he had known. He began to think she had seen and meant to give him the slip.

She stopped, after ten minutes’ quick walking, at one of the small houses in a street where the builders appeared to have used as much stone and as little glass as they possibly could. There were steep flights of steps and heavy porticoes, but slits of windows and no fanlights over the front doors.

Jerry waited a few minutes after the girl had disappeared. Then he followed her, but hesitated again, for he had to choose between three bells and a knocker.

He did not know Julia’s real name. The top bell was owned by “ Mr. Dawlish,” the second by “ Platt and Granate, Artificial Pearl Stringers,” and the third by “ Mrs. Griffiths,” while a brass plate under the knocker was engraved “ Brown.”

He made up his mind to try Brown, but a vigorous knock failed to produce him. So Jerry summoned Mrs. Griffiths. She sounded more friendly than Platt and Granate.

Mrs. Griffiths did not appear, but the door was opened by a small boy, in his night attire, whose

ecstatic expression and sticky face suggested the enjoyment of an unexpected supper.

"Does a young lady named Miss Julia Toms live here?" asked Jerry, softly, hoping the small boy would answer him without the interference of grown up people.

The small boy pondered the question for a while, chewing. Then he suddenly became animated.

"Julia Dawlish lives at the top—up there!" and he pointed to a dark, narrow staircase.

"What's the matter, Gwilym David?" came the voice of Mrs. Griffiths from the end of the passage.

"A man wants to see Julia."

"Top flat, you can't miss it if you go straight up," said the voice; "Gwilym David, you come back d'reckly minute!"

Gwilym David went back and Jerry started upstairs, quickly while his way was lighted by the gas in the passage, slowly and gropingly for the last two flights.

It was not until then that he began to feel nervous as to his reception. After all, he had no right to follow Julia, no excuse to offer, no apology ready. He longed to see her, it is true, but how could he make her believe that his longing was stronger than his curiosity?

For a minute he felt inclined to creep downstairs again and disappear.

Then he heard her voice, talking gaily, and the sound of it stayed his feet. A light gleamed under one of the doors. Jerry advanced and tapped, very meekly. The talking stopped. He tapped once more.

"It must be Mrs. Griffiths," said Julia, softly; "Come in, Mrs. Griffiths."

Jerry opened the door, but did not go in.

He will cherish the picture that he saw to the end of his life. It is painted in his memory in the soft, bright colours of Home.

He looked upon a little room, lamp-lighted, and

warm with a glowing fire. There was a simple supper table; branches of Winter leaves and red berries; a small piano, old furniture, gay curtains; everything that could be polished twinkled and shone; there were no pictures on the walls, but several statuettes on brackets; only a few books; a typewriter on its own little table; and a violin lying in its open case beside a music-stand. A shaggy dog by the hearth gave a low growl, but stood still, waiting for his cue.

Julia sprang to her feet as she caught sight of the unexpected guest.

There was a man sitting at the table, who turned his face towards the door, without rising. The girl's hand was on his shoulder and Jerry knew that it was her father. They were like, and strangely unlike, each other. The colouring and shape of their features were the same, but the man's hair was white, and his face, as opposed to the girl's quick, joyful, startled expression, was placid and aloof. His eyelids were tightly closed, sunken, and his brows were drawn together, not as if he frowned, but from old habit in the past.

Jerry saw that he was blind.

* * * * *

The fluent Gerado, for the first time for many years, could find no words.

The secret of Julia's life suddenly flashed upon him, and, with the swiftness of unerring thought, he compared it with his own.

She worked to support her father; she was happy in this dull little house, far from the scenes where he squandered money every day; she laughed at poverty and cared nothing for the trifles that other women—women he had flattered and admired—sigh and struggle and break their foolish hearts to possess.

She was brave, and strong, and wise.

The friendship of Alison Booker, the beauty of Rosamond Courtley, the sanity and loyalty of Blond

Valentine, the charm of Coral de Lacey—all the winning qualities of all the girls he had ever loved—were centred in Julia.

His eyes saw the loveliness that others missed; a new tenderness and trust swept over him; he was twice the man he had been in the light of self-knowledge; his spirit was lost in wonder—but definite thoughts such as these never occurred to Jerry Cuff.

He stared helplessly at Julia, and Julia stared at him. What did she mean to do? Turn him out? His fate was in her hands.

“Who is it, my dear?” said the blind man.

Jerry could hardly breathe for the quivering minute between the question and her reply. A cruel word would banish him into darkness and despair. A kind word would save him from destruction. Which?

Julia’s expression of amazement gradually changed and melted into a look of unspeakable happiness. They smiled at each other, eyes and lips responsive.

“It is Jerry Cuff, Father,” she said, in the calm voice of the commonplace; “He has come to see us for a few minutes. I’ve told you about him and his beautiful drawings. Jerry, this is my dear Father —,”

* * * * *

Jerry could not stay long, but every minute added to his admiration of Julia’s self-possession. She spoke and looked as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world for a young man, without an invitation, to walk in to supper at midnight.

If it had not been for the blind man, whom she watched and tended as carefully as if they were alone, Jerry would have sat there all night, but directly her father spoke of feeling weary Julia bade their visitor good-bye. Her tone was decisive. The masterful Gerado obeyed her with a meekness which would have astounded his friends.

“Take the lamp, Julie,” said the blind man; “Light Mr. Cuff downstairs.”

It was Julia's turn to show obedience.

They went downstairs very slowly, for Jerry was unaccountably nervous of the dark corners. So much so that she was obliged to give him her hand, for he had taken the lamp and seemed incapable of holding it in the right position.

All was silent in the house. They spoke in whispers.

Jerry put down the lamp when they reached the passage. Julia opened the door.

"The fog has all gone, Jerry," she said; "You will be able to find your way home. I'm glad it isn't a very long walk from Kilburn to Regent's Park. Good night."

"Will you ever forgive me for daring to follow you, Julia?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I'll forgive you some day. Good night again!"

They clasped hands.

"I say, Julia——"

And Jerry Cuff said it.

CHAPTER XXIII

After many years. Sale of the house in Courtley Gardens. Alison and her mother talk together. The darkest hour.

"COURTLEY GARDENS, like Scotland, stands where it did," said Alison Booker.

She was talking to George Chichester at the Private View of the Royal Academy. It was several months since Alison had been to see the Chichesters, at Esher, and he had been asking the usual questions about herself and her affairs.

"Whatever other people do, there are few changes in our lives, yours and mine, are there?" said her old friend, as they walked through the galleries.

"I should have thought that the advent of Peter and Anne made a great change for you and Rosamond," replied Alison.

"Yes, in a way. They'll be jolly to paint later on," said Chichester, smiling at the thought of his little children; "I meant to say that you and I have got into the habit of spending our lives in the same houses. I should hate to leave Esher."

"I should love to leave Courtley Gardens," said Alison.

The emphasis in her usually quiet voice made the artist look at her keenly for a second.

"I thought you liked it so much. Rosamond says she can't imagine you in any other place in London."

"As all things go in circles, George, I have come round to my first feeling about our house. I find it

endurable and I hope to become attached to it in the course of time."

"Why don't you move?" asked Chichester; "I'm sure a successful novelist and playwright could live wherever she chose."

"You forget my mother and uncle Jonah."

"Isn't uncle Jonah a wonderful old boy, Alison?"

"Everybody says so. I suppose it is wonderful to live to ninety five," said Alison, dully.

They walked on in silence, Alison looking at the pictures with interest, Chichester with indifference.

"It is rather odd that you should happen to talk about Courtley Gardens to-day, George. The landlord wants to sell our house and has offered us the first refusal," said Alison.

"Of course you won't buy, as you dislike it so much?" he asked, quickly.

"I haven't made up my mind. I wonder what Rosamond will say. It all depends upon my mother. Let us go into the Water Colour Room."

Although she spoke lightly, as if the matter of the house were of little importance, Alison had reached another turning point in her life. She had not felt so excited since the first night of her first play, three years past.

The thought of leaving Courtley Gardens affected her strangely.

The long weariness of years, the inner melancholy of a nature so sensitive and repressed, made her shrink from any change, but at the same time her blood quickened to new hopes. Her eyes yearned for other sights, her ears for other sounds. Only those whom duty has bound to one place, day after day, month after month, year after year, can understand all the meaning of drear monotony.

She planned a new home in her mind, childishly pleased with little schemes; childishly eager to spend money on pretty things. A garden bloomed in her imagination. She saw herself working in it, thinking

of lovely stories and poems to be inspired by her own flowers. She pictured her mother in the Summer, shelling peas of their own growing, or sitting in the shade of leafy boughs. Even uncle Jonah, carefully transplanted like an old bush, would feel a stir of sap in the warmth of Spring.

Her chief delight would be found in a little orchard, strewn with daffodils in April, heavy with fruit in ripe October.

Alison beguiled herself, in rare happiness, with thoughts such as these as she wended homewards.

* * * * *

Mrs. Booker was sitting at the window, waiting for her. Uncle Jonah, now a tiny, weazen shadow of a man, was propped up in his arm chair, with one thick shawl over his knees and another pinned round his shoulders. In this way he was able to keep warm on a fine evening in May.

Alison met her mother at the door of the room. Her expression was not eager, but quietly happy and well satisfied. Mrs. Booker looked at her with pride.

"How pretty you look in your new coat!" she exclaimed.

Alison's expression showed her pleasure at the compliment. No one, except her mother, ever called her pretty. She crossed the room and stooped over the old man.

"How goes it, uncle Jonah?"

"Oh, goody, goody, goody! So it's Alison come home at last. Did you see the King?"—he always asked if she had seen the King—"M'dear, shall we have our tea?"

"You had your tea an hour ago!" exclaimed Mrs. Booker.

"Never mind, uncle Jonah, it will soon be supper time," said Alison, consolingly.

"Chilly night, m'dear, chilly night!" said uncle Jonah, and he rubbed his hands together with a feeble crackling, as if they were made of paper.

Alison sat down and told her mother about the principal pictures at the Academy, her talk with George Chichester, the dresses she had noticed, and the news on the evening placards. There had been a time when her mother rarely asked, and Alison did not care to answer, questions, but they had grown to depend more and more upon each other's society.

Alison's thoughts, all the time she was talking, were full of the coming change. But she did not speak of it until supper was over. Then, uncle Jonah safely gone to bed, she began to describe her plans for their new home, the garden and the orchard.

Mrs. Booker listened in silence, busily sewing. She could no longer do embroidery, for her hands shook and her sight was failing, but she patched and darned with the old thriftiness.

It was some time before Alison directly appealed to her, she was so full of her own schemes. But it came at last:—

"Well, Mother dear, what do you say? When shall we say good-bye to old Courtley Gardens?"

Mrs. Booker made several attempts to thread her needle before replying. She liked to thread a needle herself, however long it took. Alison waited with outward patience, inwardly chafing.

"Then I suppose you can't afford to buy the house, Ally?" said Mrs. Booker.

"Buy the house?" repeated her daughter, in a slow voice of surprise; "Do you mean this house—this dull, poor old house we've had to live in for so long?"

"Is it poor and dull?" asked the other, glancing round the pretty room.

"Don't misunderstand me, dearest. It's all very well in its way, but surely you would like a change? We seem to know every street in the neighbourhood and all the people in all the streets!"

"They're very kind neighbours in Courtley Gardens, Ally."

"Yes, but we shall find other kind neighbours."

"What about your poor uncle, Ally? I doubt whether he would feel at home anywhere else."

"We could take him in a carriage and arrange his room in the same old way."

Mrs. Booker slowly shook her head.

"Besides, I do think that you and I have a right to consider ourselves," Alison went on, earnestly; "We have made so many sacrifices for uncle Jonah. No holidays together, because of uncle Jonah. No little parties here, because of uncle Jonah. No change in the house for years, because of uncle Jonah."

"I know it's hard upon you, Ally——"

"And upon you, Mother."

"Not in the same way, dear. I'm getting old and I like a quiet, indoor life."

"Then you are quite contented? You don't want us to move away?"

Alison asked the question with a quiver in her voice. She clasped her hands tightly together under the table, and Mrs. Booker did not see that she was trembling.

"Yes, I'm quite contented and happy, Ally, but if we are obliged to make a change, of course I shan't complain."

"You think we ought to buy this house, Mother?"

"If we can afford it, my dear. We could pay by degrees, you know, and in time we might be able to have it thoroughly repaired inside and out."

Mrs. Booker put aside her work for a minute, suddenly interested to the point of mild excitement.

"I've always wanted to live in a house of my own, but I didn't dare to believe it would ever come to pass. It must be such a blessing not to dread quarter days coming round. More than anything else, it would be such a heavy, heavy weight off my mind."

"Would it, Mother? Why?"

"Oh, my dear, to know that you'll always have a roof over your head. A house of your very own, Ally! Think of it?"

"I am thinking of it, Mother."

"If ever you want to raise money, you can let it, but I hope you never will. I hope it will be a pleasure to you for many years to come, and a peaceful refuge in your old age."

Mrs. Booker took up her work again with fresh energy.

Alison bent over the table and tore a piece of waste paper into little bits, absent-mindedly arranging them in a design upon the cloth.

The brightness faded out of her eyes. She saw the new rooms of her daydream, the garden, and the fair orchard, pass away. Then her thoughts turned back to another scene. . . .

* * * * *

May was gone and she felt the warmth of later Summer on her face, as the sun was setting. She stood in the lights and shadows of a wide room, where there were books and a big writing table, and an atmosphere of work, and happiness, and repose.

She heard the dear voice of Wilbur Rathbone; she saw his face—she felt the tenderness of his hand—his kiss——

Then a door shut and she was alone, with the long night before her and the long years beyond. . . .

* * * * *

"Ally dear!"

Alison started and looked blankly across the table at her mother.

"Why, what's the matter with you, Ally?"

"Nothing, dearest, nothing!" she replied, rising from her chair; "I'm going upstairs to write a letter. I'll be down again in a few minutes."

She went up to Mrs. Booker and put her arms lovingly round her mother's neck.

"So it would make you happier to live in a house of our own, dearest?" she said, with her face pressed

to her mother's withered cheek; "It worries you to think of leaving Courtley Gardens, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Ally, I'm afraid it does. I don't feel equal to the moving, with your poor uncle."

"I would do all the work and undertake to look after uncle Jonah, Mother."

"Then you think it is wrong to invest so much money in house property, Ally?"

"No, it isn't that. We can afford it, thanks to the play. That's the only way to make money by writing."

"You've done well with your novels, my dear."

"Oh, yes. I've made enough with each one to scrape along while I wrote another—but never mind that. We'll have the house, Mother, if it will please you so much."

"Won't it please you also, Ally?"

"Of course! Of course! I shall be very proud."

Mrs. Booker gave a sigh of deep satisfaction.

"It's a dreadful thing to come to want, Ally, but it will never happen to us now. We've much to be grateful for, thank God."

Alison kissed her and went out of the room.

She dragged herself upstairs very slowly, leaning her shoulder against the wall. She went into her little study at the top of the house, and locked the door. It was prettier than of old, for she had been able to buy new furniture, a fine writing desk, and many books. There were soft curtains and bowls of flowers.

Alison sat down in her favourite place by the open window. She softly repeated her mother's words.

"It's a dreadful thing to come to want, but it will never happen to us now."

So that was the end of all ambition—the dreams, the hopes, the struggles, the success! She would never come to want. There was a refuge for her old age. What had she done with her life? Loved in vain and made money with a play.

It was long since she had looked behind and seen her youth vanishing. It was gone. A little while,

and old age would sit in her chair, write at her desk, look out of her eyes on a changed world. Her work would be forgotten . . . her lover of an hour would be dead. . . .

Alison suddenly clasped her hands over her face, hiding the most bitter tears she had ever wept; more bitter than any failure had wrung from her in the past; more bitter than on the day of her actual parting with Wilbur Rathbone.

The illusions of life had fallen away from her, one by one, and the disappointment of her mother's attitude towards Courtley Gardens—so trifling a disappointment in comparison with other things—awakened thoughts long suppressed, regrets that she had believed were gone forever.

Alison had been courageous, determined; she had sought to find relief in simple pleasures, the happiness of love in devotion to her mother, interests in friendship, self-expression in writing her books, peace of mind in faith.

It had all failed. She was unutterably lonely; the future held no joy for her. She told herself in broken words that time could only deaden her heart, never console.

The passion of her grief was soon spent in its violence. She went into her other room and threw herself upon the bed, with hands still shutting the daylight from her eyes.

The long May evening turned into night, but Alison did not move or make a sound.

It was not until she heard her mother's voice, and her mother's hand trying the handle of the door, that she roused herself and listened.

Then she slowly crept to the door and leaned against it, answering in a few soft words.

"Is it so late? No—no—there's nothing wrong. I'll be down in a few minutes, Mother dear. I'm just coming—don't wait there for me—I'm just coming——"

CHAPTER XXIV

Jerry Cuff's wife draws his attention to an advertisement. He remembers the Fraternity of St. Swithin, and visits it again after twenty years' absence. Slight changes!

It was over twenty years since Jerry Cuff had left the Fraternity of St. Swithin.

He had had no desire to return. Alison told him of Rosamond Courtley's marriage to Chichester, and there was no one else he cared to see at the old Grapes in Shepherd's Bush.

It was Mrs. Jerry, oddly enough, who was the cause of his going back.

They were at breakfast in their house in Regent's Park; not Jerry's original house, but a big, semi-detached, desirable family residence, as it would be described by an estate agent.

Gerado was little changed, except that his wavy hair was a great deal thinner and the rest of him a great deal stouter. His wife had long given up playing the cornet in public, although she still performed for the pleasure of her friends, standing on her feet, not on anybody's shoulders as in the days of the Toms Family. Indeed, the musical ability of the Gerado household was the admiration of the neighbours, when it did not drive them to distraction.

Mrs. Gerado's father played the violin, Mr. Gerado twanged the banjo, their daughter promised to surpass her mother on the cornet, and the two sons had

learned, and conscientiously practised, the piano.

To return to the breakfast-room. Jerry was lounging at his side of the table, looking through a seed-grower's catalogue, deciding on the plants he would buy for his new rock garden. Mrs. Jerry was reading a column of advice on Spring sales in a morning newspaper.

"Do you think a gown like this would suit me, J.?" she asked, suddenly, rising to show him a sketch of a girl in a loose frock that looked as if it were made of wall paper.

"Not unless you grew seven feet tall, like this young woman, and knocked a few years off your *anno domini*, Julia," replied Jerry.

He gave a careless glance at the sketch, then it seemed to hold his attention. He took the paper out of his wife's hand and began to read the letter-press.

"I say, this frock was made at the Fraternity of St. Swithin!" he exclaimed.

"Well, dear, what about it?" she asked.

"I used to know these people who are advertising—at least, I knew the man, John Hooper. He was a silly ass! No, I'm thinking of Fra Lionel, not Fra John. Hooper had some sense."

"I don't know what you're talking about, J.," said Mrs. Cuff.

"Where do they hang out?" continued Jerry, too interested in the paper to answer her.

"'Fraternity of St. Swithin, No. 8, Portdown Street, Bayswater,'" read Julia, pointing to the address.

"Let's go and look them up!" exclaimed Jerry; "You needn't buy any swell dresses, you know. You might get a hat, or something else cheap."

Julia smiled at his simplicity.

"Of course I'll go with you, if you like, J.," she said; "Let us go this afternoon."

"I wonder why the Fraternity left the Grapes public house," said Jerry.

"Did they ever sell women's clothes at a public house?" cried Julia.

"No, but they did spinning, and weaving, and carpentry. The idea was to help the poor people in the neighbourhood to make strong and pretty things for themselves."

"I like that," said Julia, thoughtfully; "Did John Hooper and his wife start the Fraternity?"

"No, it was in the hands of a young lady. I think her name was Rosamond Courtley," he replied.

"I suppose you liked and admired her very much?"

"Why do you suppose anything of the sort?" asked Jerry; "You know, Julia, you're too sharp sometimes. You'll cut yourself."

"Not at all. I saw your face when you read the advertisement," said his wife, gaily; "Why shouldn't you have liked and admired Miss Rosamond Courtley? Was she your very First, J.?"

"Never you mind. You know my very Last and that ought to satisfy you," he replied, laughing and returning to his catalogue.

* * * * *

Mr. and Mrs. Gerado found that Portdown Street was near enough to Queen's Road and Westbourne Grove to capture some of the customers from those busy thoroughfares, but with a certain exclusiveness of its own.

There was a small second-hand bookshop, for instance, with a few rare treasures on its shelves; a bootmaker whose shoes were made after the pattern of the human foot; an old fashioned herbalist; and a lace shop, its tiny, one-pane window gay with pillows and bobbins.

Jerry looked in vain for the antique sign from the Grapes. St. Swithin had grown portly and prosperous, according to his latest portrait over No. 8, being represented in his robes as Bishop of Win-

chester with a halo as bright as a copper warming pan, not, as Rosamond had imaged him, a grave old monk thoroughly enjoying a rain-storm.

There was an oak spinning wheel in the window, with a distaff decked with coloured wools, a string of agate beads, and the original wall paper gown of the advertisement.

They were received on entering by a charming, little, voluble lady with faded red hair.

Gerado asked for Mr. Hooper.

"I'm so sorry!" said the little lady; "My husband is not in. He spends so much time at our workshops."

"Are your workshops in Shepherd's Bush?" asked Jerry.

She looked surprised for a second, then smiled delightedly.

"Yes. Do you know them? Perhaps you are a friend of my husband's?" she replied, with a sharp, inquisitive glance from one to the other.

"Well, you know, the fact is I was one of the original Brotherhood," said Jerry, who thought her rather attractive; "I knew Miss Courtley—Mrs. Chichester as she is now—and your husband, and Lionel Ford, and all the old gang, but I never had the pleasure of meeting you."

"No, I didn't belong to the old *gang*," replied Mrs. Hooper, with an emphasis on the word that Julia saw was meant for a reproof, but was lost upon Jerry; "I became manageress some time before Miss Courtley's marriage. My name was Kate Browning. Now the business is entirely mine—and my husband's, of course," she added, as an afterthought.

She then invited her visitors into a little office, or sitting room, at the back of the shop, with "St. Swithin's" painted upon the glass door, as if the patron saint of the establishment would be found within. It was furnished with some of the finely carved chairs which Fra Lionel and his pupils had made

at the Grapes. The original sign was framed and hanging upon the wall, the only other picture being an engraving of George Chichester's well known portrait of Rosamond.

Jerry introduced his wife. Kate Hooper, who had noticed how expensively, if a little too showily, she was dressed, welcomed them both most cordially.

"It sounds odd to me to hear you talking of the Fraternity as a 'business,' Mrs. Hooper," said Jerry; "In the old days we hated the word. Lionel Ford used to say a good business man would be a bad Brother."

"I agree with him in theory," she answered, in a tone of conviction; "But in practice, we have found it impossible to carry on without enterprise."

"Miss Courtley and the boys had enterprise, but it was a different sort," said Jerry; "No doubt we were young and unpractical."

"I think you were wonderful!" ejaculated Kate; "Nothing would have pleased us better, John and me, than to have lived in poverty at the workshops all our lives, but we had to think of others, Mr. Gerado. We wanted to give our children every advantage we could. After all——" and she laughed slily—"other members of the Fraternity have tried to get on in the world, and succeeded."

Jerry did not see the point, but his wife did.

"That's very true," he rejoined; "I was never quite clear about the aims and ideas behind St. Swithin's, but then I hadn't much to do with it. What's become of Lionel Ford? He was the chap to understand Rosamond. He could talk jolly well, when he wasn't sulky."

"He vanished into space long ago," said Mrs. Hooper; "We saw him only two or three times after Miss Courtley left us. As you say, he was sulky and opposed every alteration and improvement."

"What about little Lucy Stacey? Has she vanished too?"

"Oh, no, dear Lucy is still with us. People who come here often ask to be allowed to visit our workshops, so Lucy is at home to receive customers every Monday afternoon. She is so enthusiastic, poor darling! I don't believe she realizes how we have changed with the times. She gives strangers such a beautiful impression of our art."

"Does she still work at the loom, or make sandals?" asked Jerry.

"She still makes sandals, for they sell remarkably well, but we have got rid of all our hand looms, Mr. Gerado. She has kept her spinning wheel. We encourage her to use it on visiting days. It looks so charming."

"And what has become of Mrs. Grain?"

"We were obliged to part with dear Mrs. Grain. You know how devoted we all were to Miss Courtley—she and I were inseparable for years—but Mrs. Grain carried her allegiance too far. When John and I agreed to carry on the Fraternity it was not with the idea of slavishly copying the original plans. Mrs. Grain was unable to adapt herself, and so we separated on the best of terms."

"I hope she got another job? She was a good, single-hearted little woman," said Jerry.

"Yes, indeed! I worship her!" said Mrs. Hooper; "I'm glad to say she is now doing splendidly. She is assistant manageress at a Fresh Air and Cold Water kind of boarding house, somewhere in the Chilterns. I should love to stop there, but we are obliged to go to the sea, for the sake of our young people, when we get a holiday."

"Do the boarders live on fresh air and cold water?" asked Mrs. Gerado, smiling.

"Oh, no. They have radishes, and mushrooms, and charcoal biscuits, and all that kind of delicious food, uncooked," said Mrs. Hooper, vaguely; "Then they are given sun and wind baths, and Mrs. Grain plays on them every night and morning with the hose."

"Too strenuous for a weakling like me," observed Jerry.

"Oh, it would do you a world of good!" exclaimed Mrs. Hooper; "John tried it for a fortnight, and he said he never felt so ready to get back to work. It is as much as I can do, at the end of an ordinary holiday, to drag him away from the seaside."

"Well, it's been awfully fine to hear all about the St. Swithin people," said Jerry, who was beginning to weary of the little, gushing red-haired woman; "But we mustn't forget our second reason for looking you up. My wife wants to see some of your goods. Nothing shoddy, you know. We can afford the best," he added, with a touch of the old boastfulness.

Mrs. Hooper was far less effusive in her manner with Julia, for she perceived at once that Mrs. Gerado was more quick-witted and better bred than Mr. Gerado. They had been silently taking stock, and, after the manner of women, fully appreciated—without liking—each other's good qualities.

Jerry wandered about the shop while Julia made her purchases, amused at the little pictures of St. Swithin on the walls and in the show-cases; he even made his appearance at the top of the expensive bill, the strangest place for a humble saint to be found.

Jerry would have liked to see Fra John, but Mrs. Hooper did not expect him to return to the shop that day; she begged them to repeat their visit, not as customers, but friends. Having made them promise to do this, she added carelessly that Mrs. Gerado would be enchanted with some little frocks that were due from the workshops the following week.

"Do you still hold free classes at the old place in Shepherd's Bush?" asked Jerry, after bidding her good-bye.

"Not at present. We were obliged to give them up, but we hope to begin again—some day. *Au revoir*, Mr. Gerado. John will be so bitterly disappointed to have missed you. Do come again, both

of you. Did I give you one of our little books, Mrs. Gerado? It's just the story of St. Swithin and our Fraternity. Don't bother to look at the last pages, they were only put in to give some idea of our charges. Good-bye! Good-bye!"

Kate Hooper stood at the door, as they walked away, kissing and waving her hand whenever they turned their heads. She looked a fragile, worn little thing in the sunshine, with her faded red hair, still pretty, but hard and shrewd.

"Well, how do you like the Fraternity of St. Swithin, old girl?" said Jerry to his wife.

"I should have liked it much better in the old days," she replied.

"I don't know about that, for they've got on splendidly. Are you satisfied with the stuff you bought? It cost a pretty penny."

"I'm more than satisfied, J. They sell beautiful things, and that Mrs. John Hooper is a clever, ambitious woman. She's had a hard struggle, and it isn't over, but she feels safe. She rules her husband—and everybody else—firmly, but kindly on the whole. They were ill matched at first, but they get on very happily now. At all events, they don't quarrel."

"How on earth can you tell that, Julia?" asked her husband.

"I don't know," said Julia, after pondering his question for a minute and giving it up; "I just thought of it as we looked at each other, and I expect she guesses a good deal that's true about me."

"Oh, women!" exclaimed Jerry, irritably; "I can't make them out."

"Don't try, dear," said Julia; "I'm really delighted with the clothes at your Fraternity, but I wish I'd known it in the old days."

CHAPTER XXV

The last of the story. Alison with her dear friends. The orchard at night, and the echo of Rathbone's words.

THE heavy and refreshing rain which followed the heat of last Summer fell, like a shimmering veil, over Chichester's garden and little orchard.

The longing earth was drenched at last; the roots of the shrivelled grass quickened to new life; the parched plants stirred and dipped and shuddered. Dead leaves were stripped from the trees. The birds were as still as if it were midnight.

The only sound in the whole world was the driving fall of rain.

* * * * *

A little group of people stood at one of the big windows of the studio, watching, and talking of the long splendour of the Summer.

Chichester was there with his younger children. Tiny and Tot—but no one had called them Tiny and Tot for many a year—were both married. His elder son, a soldier in the Great War, had also a home of his own, but the younger boy and two girls were still the daily joy, and endless anxiety, of their parents' lives.

Rosamond's children could never be dull. All her vivid, restless beauty, her enthusiasm and gaiety, had passed on with the torch of life, but differently shown

in every new spirit, tempered and strengthened by the love of the quiet, great man whom she had married.

The artist himself was little changed, but Rosamond was more appealing than in youth, more gracious, more endearing. In her face one could read the sweet records of love and loving, and promises as sweet.

Her old and true friend, Alison Booker, stood beside her, with one hand on the shoulder of the younger Rosamond.

Alison did not often join in the gay talk, as they watched the welcome rain, for her thoughts were all of quaint fancies for a fairy tale she was writing.

"Your little garden in Courtley Gardens will seem like a different place, Ally," said Rosamond; "Don't you feel anxious to go home and look at it?"

"Oh, Mother, that sounds like driving Auntie Ally away!" cried one of the girls.

"It was a very happy thought, Alison, to turn a dull back yard into a flowery garden," said Chichester, smiling at her in his kind, affectionate way.

"Mother calls it our oasis," said Alison; "And it was the one great interest of uncle Jonah's life for his last few years."

"Do you miss your uncle Jonah?" asked the other girl, looking wonderingly at Alison. She could just remember uncle Jonah as a little old mummy of a man who disliked children, calling feebly "Shoo! Shoo!" when they drew near to him, as if they were young chickens, or "Go on—gee-up!" as if they were ponies who would gallop away.

"I miss him, dear, but I cannot wish him back again—that sounds like an inscription on a tombstone," replied Alison, smiling.

"I mean, he wasn't a very lively old gentleman, was he?" asked the child, putting it politely.

"As lively as most old gentlemen in the nineties," said Alison.

"I understand," said the little girl, and she added,

more politely still:—"I suppose one gets used to living with old people. Mrs. Booker is very old too, isn't she, Auntie Ally?"

"No, not very old," said Alison, quickly; "At least, she will never seem very old to me. I'm different from you, Rosie. I heard you call a lady of thirty 'an elderly person' the other day."

"I should think so!" exclaimed Rosie; "I wish people were always young. It's dreadful to think how old Mother is, and as for Father——!"

She sighed and looked sadly at Chichester, then cheered up again and added:—

"But I expect he'll live as long as uncle Jonah if we take good care of him."

Rosamond laughed and put her hand through Alison's arm.

"Do you remember when we first confided our ages to each other, Alison? It was on the day I arrived at your house. You were such a demure, solemn young woman. When I heard you were a journalist I felt certain you studied deep and obscure subjects, and then you told me you were writing theatrical paragraphs!"

"That must have been long before Auntie Ally published novels," said George the younger.

"I think I'll be a writer myself some day," said little Rosie, thoughtfully; "Does one enjoy inventing books?"

"I enjoy mine, Rosie, more than anything else in the world."

* * * * *

The veil of rain grew thinner. A pale light broke through it from the far sky, and the lashing sound of its fall changed and became less.

After a little while the garden began to glisten and shine, but dimly, and the drooping boughs shook off their weight of water.

Then there was the twitter of a bird—silence—and

another twitter. Soft drops, more bright than diamonds, were hanging on every leaf, falling and melting into one another. A gleam of sunshine came and was gone again. The chorus of the birds was loud and sweet. The smell of the ground became strong and fresh and alive.

* * * * *

"Why do you come to see us so rarely in these days, Alison?" said Rosamond Chichester.

"I can't bear to leave Mother by herself," said Alison.

They were alone together, in Rosamond's room, sitting on a wide window-seat overlooking the garden.

"You don't leave her by herself, Ally dear. She has an ideal companion in my sister."

"I know that, we are indeed fortunate, but Mother and I are so much to each other now."

"Will you forgive me if I say that sometimes—how can I put it?—sometimes I'm a little sorry. For your sake, Alison."

"Why, Rosamond?"

"It will be so terrible for you, darling, when the time comes——" and she stopped, with her fond eyes studying her friend's face.

"When the time comes for us to part never to meet again in this life," Alison ended the sentence, calmly; "It would be harder for her to be left alone than for me, you know."

"That isn't very likely, Ally. After all, in the course of nature——"

"True! I have often thought of that, but I shall bear it well, Rosamond."

She was silent for a minute, looking down at the rain-swept grass and then at the darkling sky.

"There was a time in our lives when I simply didn't dare to think of losing her, Rosamond," Alison went on; "The dread of it haunted me day and night. I used to lie awake for the happiness of hearing her

quiet breath in sleep. I felt as if she were literally a part of myself, as I was a part of her before my birth. I would have died to save her from pain. I have long consecrated my life to her."

"Ally dear," replied Rosamond; "I know how strong and wonderful is the bond between mother and child—who knows it better than I?—but such devotion as yours——" again she stopped, and again her friend gave words to her thought.

"It was excessive, exaggerated, unwise. I'm speaking of the past, dear. Had I married, as you did, my love would not have centred in one object."

"I wish that you had married, Alison."

"So do I, Rosamond."

They looked at each other questioningly, sadly, for a minute. Then Alison, for the first time, spoke of Wilbur Rathbone. There was little to tell. As her friend listened, she felt the stirring of deep waters; the inner light and shadows of a spirit aloof; the mystery of a love tender and human, but a love exalted and untouched by disillusion, or change, or remorse.

Alison spoke without reserve, simply. The other woman's experience of life, so different in its promise and fulfilment, so rich in the knowledge of husband, home and children, made her wonder and pause.

When she spoke at last it was to give words to her first impulsive thought.

"Oh, Alison! Wouldn't it have been better for you, and for him, to have gone away together and lived your own lives regardless of the world?"

"There have been many, many times when I have asked myself that question, Rosamond, and answered—yes. But if I had to pass through it all again, I know I should do the same as I did then."

"Alison, have you ever thought how little you knew of this man? You went to see him only once! You never met, or heard from, him again?"

"We never met again, but on the first night of my

play—we shall never forget that night, shall we, Rosamond?—he sent me some roses. He was abroad, but he must have read about it in an English newspaper and given an order to a London florist.”

“How do you know they came from him? Did he write to you?”

“Not a letter, only his name—Wilbur—on a plain card in a sealed envelope fastened to the flowers.”

“And when you heard of his death——”

“It was so strange to me, Rosamond! I didn’t cry, or rage, as I should have done when I was young, but it killed something in me that will never live again. Wilbur Rathbone dead! Wilbur dead! My darling!”

She pressed the palms of her hands against her eyes for a few minutes. Then she suddenly laid her arms on her friend’s shoulders, with locked fingers round her neck.

“Why should I be unhappy, Rosamond? He loved me and never forgot me, I know. I loved him and I love his dear memory. I have missed the best in life, but the bitterness and the grief are over—or I feel them very seldom—all passes——”

“Oh, Alison! My heart aches to hear you speak like this. You have been so faithful, so brave, so good. . . .”

* * * * *

Night had fallen. The rain was over and the garden looked grey and mysterious beneath the grey and mysterious heavens.

Alison was alone in the orchard. She heard the sound of music in the house, and Rosamond’s clear voice singing with the children.

A deep cloud of depression had driven her out, to be alone for a few minutes in silence. She felt attuned to the sombre hour. The wind blew against her cheek like a cool breath, and shadows lurked among the distant trees.

She thought of the world of Autumn and the stern Winter still to come.

What was her life but a fruitless orchard? Love and lover gone for ever. Youth behind her. Her books written but to pass away; all the work of years, and the emotion of her inmost heart, read and forgotten in a month. Her mother so very old, so very old. . . .

She stood still, the gentle music unheard, the beauty of the night unseen, her spirit wandering towards the shadows of despair.

* * * * *

Suddenly the dark cloud lifted.

Alison remembered the days of Spring. She remembered the exquisite scent and the flush of apple blossoms, while the earth was lovely with daffodils.

She heard the echo of Wilbur Rathbone's voice in her heart:—

“Beauty and happiness in the present hour always justify themselves. We have seen the flowers and believed in their promise, even if the fruit is gathered by others, or there is no fruit at all in the little orchard that we call our own.”

* * * * *

Wilbur had spoken the truth.

She was happy in the happiness of Rosamond and Chichester, and she loved their children.

She was happy in knowing that her dear boy, Jerry Cuff, had returned to his old friend with the old affection, the same Jerry in a hundred ways, but stronger, better, more unselfish, with Julia beside him.

She was happy to think of her books, for they had never failed in sincerity and earnestness, and proud to be a writer of stories, the least and most humble of a great and glorious company.

She was the darling of her mother's heart—and tomorrow she would return to their pretty house in old

Courtley Gardens; the dear face would be at the window, waiting; the dear voice would be strong and eager again in its welcome.

She was happy in the labour and rest of her quiet life; in the old, ever new delight of her work; in the endless study and poignant thoughts of this baffling, thrilling, wondrous world. She was happiest of all in her own heroic outlook, the uses of her experience, the love of beauty, the inner vision of truth—she had seen the flowers and believed in their promise, even if the fruit were gathered by others.

So, with a light step, Alison Booker turned away from the orchard and passed into her friends' house.

THE END

Messrs. Hutchinson & Co.

are pleased to give the following particulars of many important New Books for the Autumn, 1921, and also a splendid list of New Novels, which, as will be seen by the undermentioned names, are almost all by the Leading Authors.

STEPHEN McKENNA
KATHLYN RHODES
GILBERT FRANKAU
W. B. MAXWELL
RAFAEL SABATINI
ELINOR MORDAUNT
SIR PHILIP GIBBS
AGHMED ABDULLAH
E. NESBIT
LADY MILES
DOROTA FLATAU
REBECCA WEST
ISABEL C. CLARKE
PEGGY WEBLING
UNA L. SILBERRAD
WINIFRED GRAHAM
M. MORGAN GIBBON
EDITH HENRIETTA FOWLER
LADY KING-HALL
H. B. SOMERVILLE
MARIE BJELKE PETERSEN
MRS. BELLOC LOWNDES
MABEL BARNES-GRUNDY
DOROTHEA CONYERS
DIANA PATRICK
G. B. BURGIN
CHARLES MARRIOTT
"RITA"
RINA RAMSAY and J. OTHO PAGET
ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE
F. BANCROFT
SELWYN JEPSON
MRS. HORACE TREMLETT
TICKNER EDWARDES
PHYLLIS AUSTIN
ANTHONY M. LUDOVICI
MRS. BAILLIE SAUNDERS
TALBOT MUNDY
NORMA LORIMER
OURTIS YORKE

Hutchinson's New Novels. 8/6 Net

The Love Story of Aliette Brunton

By GILBERT FRANKAU

Author of "Peter Jackson, Cigar Merchant," "The Seeds of Enchantment," etc.

One of the most versatile writers of to-day, Mr. Gilbert Frankau follows his successes "Peter Jackson" and "The Seeds of Enchantment" with a powerful story in an entirely new vein.

In "The Love Story of Aliette Brunton" he presents a penetrating and sympathetic study of a woman who dared all for love's sake. It is more than an interest-compelling story; it is a courageous and illuminating book, which should influence men and women who give serious thought to the modern problems of marriage and divorce.

The Great Husband Hunt

By MABEL BARNES-GRUNDY

Author of "A Girl for Sale," "Her Mad Month," etc. etc.

In "The Great Husband Hunt," Mrs. Barnes-Grundy introduces us to a delightful elderly and impecunious bachelor uncle who has shared his home in Devonshire with four nice and interesting orphan nieces, but who have been denied the gift of beauty. Unexpectedly inheriting a fortune, he offers a thousand pounds down to the first of the four who is engaged to be married within a prescribed time and a handsome dowry when the marriage is solemnised. How the four accept the challenge and set forth in quest of husbands makes a most amusing tale.

A Striking First Novel

The Qualified Adventurer By SELWYN JEPSON

A story of youth—therefore of love and adventure—on blue seas under blue skies, by a new author with a name pleasantly familiar to lovers of good fiction. The son of Edgar Jepson, Selwyn Jepson makes a most promising literary début.

"The Qualified Adventurer" tells of a young man fettered to a city office, dreaming of love, romance and adventure. Then the dreams come true. He is sent on a quest for hidden jade on board a tramp steamer and experiences many thrilling adventures, in which a vivid, lovable girl plays a prominent part.

Captain Blood

By RAFAEL SABATINI

Author of "Scaramouche," "The Trampling of the Lilies," etc.

From the logs and diaries of Jeremiah Pitt—which Mr. Sabatini claims to have discovered—the romantic story of Captain Peter Blood has been mainly reconstructed.

Sir Henry Morgan, most celebrated of all the buccaneer leaders, had an able chronicler in the person of the Dutchman Esquemeling, who sailed with him. What Esquemeling did for Morgan, Jeremiah Pitt has done for Captain Blood.

The career of Blood, a cultured man driven by the malignity of Fate to indulge an inborn appetite for adventure, is an Odyssey set aglow by the great love which kept him honourable amid dishonour.

Hutchinson's New Novels. 8/6 Net

A Little More

By W. B. MAXWELL

Mr. Maxwell's new novel may be described as a modern Morality. The idea underlying the title should have a very wide application, since almost everyone is wishing for "a little more." This is the case of the comfortable middle-class family of the Welbys as presented to the reader by Mr. Maxwell. They possess enough for the ordinary needs of life and ought to be contented, but they begin to crave for a little more.

The story is full of character and the crisp humour that invariably distinguishes this author's work.

The Path of Love

By NORMA LORIMER

Author of "A Mender of Images," etc.

All who know Miss Lorimer's picturesque novel of Sicilian life, "A Mender of Images," will await with impatience the publication of her new novel, "The Path of Love," which tells the story of the heroine's life in Italy and England, which, although her native country, she had never seen in youth. This is the first book Miss Lorimer has written since "The Mender of Images."

It is a moving tale with a strong human interest, and whilst its delicate charm fascinates, the significance of its emotional appeal will not be lost on the reader.

The Fruitless Orchard

By PEGGY WEBLING

Author of "Comedy Corner," "In Our Street," etc.

Peggy Webling's new novel tells the life-story of a London girl. Unlike her latest success, "Comedy Corner," it does not follow the doings of one character alone, but also describes the career of Little Jerry, from his humble beginnings as a street-artist to his ultimate triumph and success; the business methods of a certain dealer in antique jewellery; the people who live in his house, and divers other interesting characters, all drawn from life.

The heroine herself is a journalist, and her work and adventures, successes and failures are the actual experiences of a now famous author.

What Timmy Did

By MRS. BELLOC-LOWNDES

Author of "Good Old Anna," "The Lonely House," "From the Vasty Deep," etc., etc.

"What Timmy Did" recalls rather "Good Old Anna" than Mrs. Belloc-Lowndes' other books. Like that famous war-story, "What Timmy Did" is typical of English life, the scene being laid in a beautiful Surrey village. For the first time Mrs. Belloc-Lowndes takes a child as her central figure, but love plays a decisive part in the story, and, as is generally the case in this writer's books, there is more than a touch of mystery.

Hutchinson's New Novels. 8/6 Net

Courage

By KATHLYN RHODES

Author of "The Desert Dreamers," "The Golden Apple,"

"Under Desert Stars," etc.

"It is not life that counts, but the courage one brings to it," is the keynote of Miss Kathlyn Rhodes's new novel, some of the best scenes of which are laid in Italy.

Owen Carey is a young Englishman who has lost practically everything in the war. On the eve of his return home his young wife is killed while motoring; and later he learns that she was in the act of leaving him. Disillusioned and at odds with Fate, he begins a new life. From this point the wheel of Fate revolves with interesting consequences.

This fine romance of love and life is sure of a warm welcome from the ever-increasing number of Miss Rhodes's readers.

Briony

By CURTIS YORKE

Author of "The Unknown Road," etc., etc.

Briony Carteret, a girl living in an old-fashioned house in Chelsea with an old housekeeper and an old Scots gardener, suddenly finds that the principal part of her income has been swept away by the absconding of a fraudulent trustee. She refuses at first to leave the old home that has so many happy associations for her, refuses to marry her chum, Sir Michael Drummond (who is rather poverty-stricken himself), refuses to live with a wealthy old aunt as her companion, or to share a flat with a feather-headed girl friend. What she does do, and with what results, Curtis Yorke's large and ever-increasing public will be interested in finding out.

The Grass Eater

By PHYLLIS AUSTIN

A charming, fantastic story by a new writer. The plot circles round an attractive girl called Brownie and a rising musician who lives mostly in a caravan with his piano. Brownie and the Grass Eater (for that is his nickname) meet and become friends. There is another girl in the story, a beautiful singer, a platonic caravanning expedition, scandal, dramatic developments, and in the end happiness for Brownie.

A delightful story which suggests something of the charm of Sir J. M. Barrie's books.

Raoul the Hunchback By H. B. SOMERVILLE

Author of "Ashes of Vengeance," etc.

Provence, during the sixteenth century, is the scene of this dramatic story. The love of the deformed Raoul, Count of Sartois, for his beautiful cousin Isabeau, his marriage with Jeanne the Gipsy, his befriendment of the mysterious Monsieur Philippe, and the envy and treachery of Raoul's heir and cousin, Otto of Var, are the main features of an absorbingly interesting romance.

Hutchinson's New Novels. 8/6 Net

The Secret Victory By STEPHEN McKENNA
Author of "Sonia," "Lady Lilith," "The Education of Eric Lane," etc.

"The Secret Victory" is the third of the Trilogy of novels of which the first was "Lady Lilith" and the second "The Education of Eric Lane." Mr. McKenna has, in "The Secret Victory," produced a novel which will be vastly to the liking of those who admire his work. It is modern of the most modern and brilliantly and wittily written.

A New Novel by the "Thomas Hardy of Sussex."
The Seventh Wave By TICKNER EDWARDES
Author of "The Honey-Star," "Tansy," etc.

"Long Len," the hero of this powerful, arresting story, belongs to a class which we believe to be absolutely new in fiction—that strange, wandering, homeless crew of mortals known as "Pikers," men who haunt the wild Sussex Highlands, scraping up a bare subsistence by selling blackberries, mushrooms, and the like to the people in the neighbouring villages and towns. In "The Seventh Wave," Mr. Tickner Edwardes well maintains his reputation as a forceful, original writer.

The Best Lover By "RITA"
Author of "Pat the Pedlar," "Peg the Rake," etc.

The present volume contains three long stories by this very popular author and will doubtless prove a great attraction to both old and new readers of "Rita's" work. "Rita" has few rivals in the art of writing really interesting and at the same time pleasantly happy stories, and these latest from her pen worthily maintain her splendid reputation.

The Toll of the Black Lake
By DOROTHEA CONYERS
Author of "The Strayings of Sandy," etc.

Kathleen Donovan, a pretty, sensitive Irish girl, is an attractive figure in Mrs. Conyers' new novel. It is a story of Ireland, and the true Irish atmosphere is, as usual, admirably conveyed. Her novels about Irish people and Irish scenes stand alone in modern fiction. Thoroughly enjoyable from first chapter to last, they appeal to all who are fond of horses, hunting, excitement and, above all, a good story.

A Knight in Paris
By MRS. HORACE TREMLETT
Author of "Platonic Peter," "Fanny the Fibber," etc.

Ravin Erskine, chivalrous and romantic, dreamt one night in Paris that a lovely maiden walked into his room—and awoke to find his dream a reality. But although Fate had joined Aline and himself together, Prince Niki of Russia, a much too fascinating villain, intervened with dire results.

The glamour of romance and an air of French gaiety make this one of the most attractive stories Mrs. Tremlett has written.

Hutchinson's New Novels. 8/6 Net

Venetian Lovers, and Other Stories

By PHILIP GIBBS

Author of "The Soul of the War," "The Street of Adventure," etc., etc.

Sir Philip Gibbs, the well-known war correspondent, journalist, and author, has turned his hand to the writing of short stories with conspicuous success. The present collection represents some of his best work, and the discriminating reader will agree that this versatile man of letters has mastered the difficult art of short-story writing. An entertaining and stimulating book.

Dusk of Moonrise

By DIANA PATRICK

Author of "The Wider Way," "Islands of Desire," "Barbara Justice."

The scene of Diana Patrick's new book, as in that successful novel "The Wider Way," is a town in the industrial West Riding of Yorkshire.

June Tempest, one of three daughters of a small tradesman, has an early love affair which does not materialise. Her marriage to Michael Mellicott, whose energy and vitality appeal to one side of her nature, is the prelude to disillusion. In the human tangle which inevitably follows Diana Patrick has ample opportunity of exercising her skill as a storyteller. This is a thoroughly absorbing story which is sure to be in great demand.

Trails to Two Moons

By ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE

This dramatic Western story deals with the efforts of the "cattle barons" of Wyoming to oust the sheep-herders who gradually encroached upon what had hitherto been considered an exclusive cattle territory.

Hilma Ring, daughter of a sheep-herder, is determined to avenge her father's death at the hands of his opponents, and is quickly caught in the whirl of the conflict.

"Trails to Two Moons" is an exciting story that is likely to win its way to huge popularity.

The Mating of the Blades

By ACHMED ABDULLAH

Author of "The Trail of the Beast."

A romantic love novel of East and West, with the action swinging from the heart of Central Asia to the heart of London, to Sussex in springtime, to the money marts of Wall Street, and back again to Asia.

A story of two brothers, of an Oriental princess with eyes as black as night, and a golden-haired American girl. A story that deals with swords that flashed free before Columbus sailed the seas . . . yet a modern story, involving tremendous business stakes.

Hutchinson's New Novels. 8/6 Net

Red, White, and Grey

By LADY MILES

Author of "The Red Flame."

Following the remarkable success of her first book, "The Red Flame," Lady Miles's new novel, "Red, White, and Grey," will be awaited with uncommon interest. There is a delicate distinction about the story which will probably secure for her second essay in fiction a reception even more favourable than that accorded to "The Red Flame." It is a story of three women—Camilla, Poppy, and Felicity—with an ending which will leave the reader thinking.

Guns of the Gods

By TALBOT MUNDY

Author of "The Eye of Zeitoon," etc.

A fascinating heroine, the Princess Yasmini, is the central figure of Mr. Talbot Mundy's thrilling new romance. A search for buried treasure, adventure, peril, intrigue, with the wonderful Yasmini predominant throughout, go to the making of this exciting novel, which is full of subtle mystery and the magic of the East. It is a book quickly read but not soon forgotten.

Tressider's Sister

By ISABEL C. CLARKE

Author of "Lady Trent's Daughter," "Ursula Finch," etc.

Miss Clarke's literary reputation has steadily increased since the publication of "By the Blue River." Her charming style and skill as a story-teller have secured a warm welcome for any novel from her pen. In "Tressider's Sister" she displays all the qualities that have distinguished her previous books, including that admirable quality of sincerity in which her work so resembles that of the late Mgr. Robert Hugh Benson.

Joab the Lover

By DOROTA FLATAU

Author of "Yellow English," "Bait," "Seven Journeys," etc.

A story of Romantic Love and Brave Adventure during the close of the eighteenth century.

Joab had leanings towards the Church, but just before he had taken the decisive step he met Sariona, a wild, beautiful gipsy girl with whom he falls in love. At her instigation he becomes a soldier of fortune, and taking her with him roams throughout the seven seas, meeting with adventure after adventure of the most thrilling nature.

The Pharisees

By M. MORGAN GIBBON

Author of "Jan," "Helen Marsden."

Miss M. Morgan Gibbon is a young writer whose progress is being followed with more than ordinary interest. Her second novel, "Helen Marsden," was described by a leading literary critic as "a triumph of characterisation," and the same qualities which went to make a big success of her first two books will be found in full abundance in her third.

"The Pharisees" is a well-told dramatic story in which the characters stand out with something of the crisp clearness of George Eliot.

Hutchinson's New Novels. 8/6 Net

The Judge

By REBECCA WEST

Author of "The Return of the Soldier."

Miss West is one of our clever modern novelists who aim at reality in art. With her vivid, dramatic style and her passion for truth she writes of life from an unusual angle, and her work has a curiously distinctive quality of its own which makes an instant appeal to all who appreciate sincerity in human relationships. Her latest novel is a brilliant piece of work—emotional, yet taking an original line which breaks down many of the old traditions, and ringing with the voice of the new generation.

What Woman Wishes By ANTHONY M. LUDOVICI

Author of "Catherine Doyle," "Mansel Fellowes" and "Too Old for Dolls"

This is a novel of passion, politics, and destiny. A complication that life is constantly bringing about—the fateful and uncontrollable love of two people who have met too late—becomes interwoven with the political life of modern England, only to be unravelled by the courageous self-sacrifice of the heroine. Mr. Ludovici's new novel is incidentally a striking presentation of modern morals and society.

Mr. Burgin's 64th Novel

Love and the Locusts

By G. B. BURGIN

In "Love and the Locusts" Mr. Burgin returns to his favourite haunts at "Four Corners," that little riverine village of the Ottawa Valley. Cyrus Field and Cissy Fulks were lovers when young. Cyrus "put out," made money, and forgot Cissy. "Old Man" Fulks also made money and died. Years after Cyrus and Cissy meet again, and she proposes that he should return to Four Corners with a hundred dollars, forgo his riches, and try to become the Cyrus Field of old.

Their endeavours to recapture the years which the locusts have eaten are described with Mr. Burgin's customary charm and literary skill.

Christabel

By EDITH HENRIETTA FOWLER

(THE HON. MRS. ROBERT HAMILTON)

"Christabel" is the story of a modern flapper who made a most unsuitable war-marriage. It deals with her subsequent psychic development, through the many mistakes and misunderstandings which such a situation necessarily involves. The book is full of delightful humour in the study of the girl's comfort-loving uncle and aunt; and contains an underlying current of the deeper *motif* below its amusing surface.

A Notable First Novel

An Engagement

By LADY KING-HALL

"An Engagement" relates the story of the engagement of Joyce Martindale, a girl of humble origin who has unexpectedly become an heiress, to the cultured and fastidious Hubert Prendergast, her varied experiences in fashionable society, her visit to an Irish castle, and after much vicissitude, often comic and sometimes pathetic, her final happiness.

Hutchinson's New Novels. 8/6 Net

Laura Creighton

By **ELINOR MORDAUNT**

Author of "The Little Soul," "Old Wine in New Bottles," etc.

Laura Creighton, a young English girl, daughter of a soldier in an important position, meets and falls in love with a stranger, a man of mixed Polish blood, whose activities and real life are concealed from her. The luxurious, suburban home of the Creightons, their rigid respect for all that is conventional and well-established, her Nihilist husband, the life to which he takes her and Laura's experiences in a strange world are vividly drawn by the gifted author of "The Little Soul." The climax of the story is intensely dramatic and the book is one which will make a deep impression on the reader.

Breakers on the Sand By **WINIFRED GRAHAM**

Author of "The Daughter Terrible," "Falling Waters," etc.

In a village, quaintly called "Old Wives," Mignon, the heroine of Winifred Graham's new novel, lives at The Sunbeams, a little house worthy of its name. Near by stands Baron Towers, where Sir Ivor Brooke and his family reside. Here young love, both sweet and bitter, obtrudes its presence as flagrantly as it dances through Mignon's garden of Sunbeams. Other characters are the divorced vicar, his erring wife and sporting brother, a rough diamond with a passionate love for horses, and an ex-Guardsman, nicknamed by the Regiment "Popinjay," whose dangerous attraction to the fair sex, lust for money and murderous instincts, bring tragic happenings to the country village.

A Fine Novel by a Tasmanian Authoress

Dusk

By **MARIE BJELKE PETERSEN**

Author of "The Captive Singer," "The Immortal Flame," etc., etc.

The story of a great passion between an exquisitely beautiful woman with a tragic secret and Warren Kerrigan, a splendid type of Colonial manhood. Their love is cradled in the magnificent country of Tasmania, whose wonderful scenic beauty the author knows so well. Kerrigan is the object of a dastardly plot, and the terrible ordeal which he undergoes in the Kingfisher mine provides a thrill such as the reader rarely experiences.

Long Odds

By **RINA RAMSAY** and **J. OTHO PAGET**

An exciting story of love and the Turf. After his father's death, Reginald Scrope comes home from abroad to the family property in Yorkshire. It is mortgaged to the hilt, but there are a few good horses in the stables, one especially, a colt named "Will o' the Wisp." With this horse and the aid of a loyal trainer, Scrope sets to work to rebuild his shattered fortunes. There is a girl jockey in the story, many exciting races, crooked work by a vindictive rival, and in the end a joint triumph.

Recent Successful Novels

McBride's First Wife

By MARGARET BAILLIE SAUNDERS

Author of "Litany Lane," "The Mayoress's Wooing," etc.

A capital story of a young Scottish doctor whose wife poses as his housekeeper. Dr. McBride secures a West End practice and gradually drifts into an entanglement with a rich infatuated widow. Dramatic developments take place. The workings of a jealous woman's mind, a woman whose powerful persistence and self-sacrificing effacement are admirably depicted; the McBrides' beautiful daughter and the part played by her loyal lover; and an attractive element of spiritual mysticism are all presented by Mrs. Baillie Saunders in this deeply interesting and entertaining novel.

The Swing of the Pendulum

By ADRIANA SPADONI

This remarkable novel is a sincere and penetrating study of a modern woman who quite naturally takes her place in the world of work and whose mind is only indifferently concerned with sex. Yet she swings through the arc of traditional and fundamental desire of woman for home and children—this, after a marriage in which she plays unsuccessfully the rôle of friend and philosopher to her husband's passion, and a love affair whose intense emotional quality does not suffice.

In the end—is it peace, is it happiness, is it life's fulfilment to which the Swing of the Pendulum brings her?

A Courageous Marriage

By MARGUERITE BRYANT

Twenty-six pounds nine shillings is what Theodora Dane has to face the world with after her invalid father's death. Accustomed to dealing with difficulties, cheerful and courageous, she considers the remarkable proposition put before her by her lawyer. Will she bind herself to go through a marriage ceremony with Stephen Herron, a mysterious recluse, accept a good allowance, and keep as far away from him as possible?

How Theodora deals with this extraordinary situation and ultimately wins triumphant happiness for Herron and herself, forms an uplifting novel of breathless interest.

Mr. G. B. Burgin's 63rd Novel.

The Man From Turkey

By G. B. BURGIN

Author of "The Shutters of Silence," "Uncle Jeremy," etc., etc.

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